

# The High Price of Losing Ukraine: Part 2 — The Military Threat and Beyond

*If Russia wins in Ukraine, US adversaries will learn that the United States can be manipulated into abandoning its interests in a winnable fight.*

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**Allowing Russia to win its war in Ukraine would be a self-imposed strategic defeat for the United States.** The United States would face the risk of a larger and costlier war in Europe. The United States would face the worst threat from Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a victorious Russia would likely emerge reconstituted and more determined to undermine the United States — and confident that it can. A Russian victory would diminish America's deterrence around the world, emboldening others with an explicit or latent intent to harm the United States. A Russian victory would create an ugly world in which the atrocities associated with Russia's way of war and way of ruling the populations under its control are normalized. Most dangerous of all, however, US adversaries would learn that they can break America's will to act in support of their strategic interests.

The ground truths of this war have not changed: Russia still explicitly intends to erase Ukraine as a concept, people, and state; Ukraine's will to fight remains strong; Russia has made no operationally significant advances this year; and Ukraine's will combined with the West's collective capability (which dwarfs Russia's) can defeat Russia on the battlefield.[1] US interests still include preventing future Russian attacks on Ukraine and helping Ukraine liberate its people and territory. Supporting Ukraine is still the best path for the United States to avoid higher costs, larger escalation risks, and a greater Russian threat. What's changing is Americans' perceptions of their interests, not the interests themselves. That American perceptions are changing is not an accident. It is, in fact, precisely the effect the Kremlin has been seeking to achieve. The Kremlin's principal effort is destroying America's will by altering Americans' understanding of their interests, and this effort appears to be working. **If Russia wins in Ukraine because of the collapse of Western aid, it will be because Russia has managed to shape Americans' understanding of reality such that the United States willingly chooses to act against its interests and values without realizing that it is doing so. Russia will have manipulated America into abandoning its own interests in a fight it could and should have won.** That's a dangerous lesson for China, Iran, and other US adversaries to learn. America's security now and in the future, in Asia and the Middle East as well as in Europe, depends on remaining solidly connected with our strategic interests and values and demonstrating that we will not fall prey to efforts to manipulate our perceptions of those interests.

## ASSESSED RISKS OF FAILURE IN UKRAINE FOR THE UNITED STATES

### *Another war under worse conditions*

**A self-imposed defeat in Ukraine will confront the United States with the real risk of another war in Europe with higher escalation risks and higher costs.** Cutting aid to Ukraine will not freeze the frontlines, as ISW has assessed.[2] It will instead diminish Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military and accelerate Russia's military drive further and further west because the fundamental driver of this war — the Kremlin's intent to eradicate Ukraine's identity and statehood — has not changed. Putin regularly restates this intent, most recently on December 19.[3] If Russia defeats Ukraine's conventional military, Ukrainians will likely turn to an insurgency, as their will to defend against the existential threat remains strong. Such an insurgency will likely last years if not decades and is unlikely to be contained within Ukraine's borders. The United States and NATO will likely face a Russian military deployed along the NATO border from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean and face enormous costs and risks in deterring further Russian aggression against NATO itself, as ISW has assessed.[4] In an alternative scenario in which Russia gets a reprieve via a premature ceasefire or insufficient Western aid that halts Ukraine's advance, but without allowing Russia to complete its conquest, Russia will rebuild and launch new attacks on Ukraine. The United States would face the high likelihood of another Russian invasion of Ukraine to complete the conquest at a higher cost of Ukrainian lives and US taxpayer dollars, the same or worse escalation risks, and under conditions that favor Russia, including degraded global support for Ukraine, degraded cohesion within Ukraine, a strengthened Putin regime, a stronger Russian military and narratives, more advantageous starting lines for Russia compared to February 2022, and higher Russian immunity to coercive measures.

**The United States risks needlessly choosing a path antithetical to its interests and values when it can still help Ukraine succeed.** The military challenge facing Ukraine is great but not insurmountable. The West already has in its arsenals the capabilities necessary to address nearly all challenges confronting Ukraine on the battlefield, as ISW assessed.[5] Russia, on the other hand, has not yet gotten onto the right side of the capability curve. The Kremlin has been

investing in regaining its offensive capability in Ukraine and with time Russia may be able to do so, but it has not been able to do so yet. The window to expel Russia from Ukraine remains open. The West has the tools to deny Russia the reprieve on the battlefield and access to global resources Russia needs to reconstitute and end the war on the West's terms and in the West's interests.

### *Greater Russian threat to the United States*

**A Russian victory in Ukraine would present the West with a reconstituted and emboldened Russia that is more determined to undermine the United States. There is no going back to the pre-2022 status quo. The United States is on track to be blindsided by Russia's transformation – again.**

**Russia's invasion of Ukraine has permanently changed Russia. It has cemented an ultra-nationalist ideology that believes in expansion by force and that is inherently anti-Western. A Russian victory in Ukraine is a certain path to another Putin or worse.** Putin has been consolidating Russia's elites and society around his pro-war agenda through a 'get out or get in line' approach.[6] His invasion necessarily relies on Russians who support the war, are willing to rally support, or are simply willing to get in line. This reliance has illuminated and nurtured the full range of Russian nationalists – from the ultra-nationalists willing or seemingly willing to pursue Putin's expansionist goals in Ukraine regardless of the cost to those largely subscribed to Putin's goals but diverging on ways to achieve them.[7] Putin has chosen not to silence and, in some cases, has empowered the Russian milblogger community and the nationalist constituency they represent, as they have shown themselves to be effective at rallying Russians in support of the war.[8] Russian nationalists in power and society are intent on restoring Russia's greatness and undermining the United States.[9] They are inherently anti-Western. They are also, ironically and depressingly, the closest thing to civil society Russia currently has. If Russia loses in Ukraine, their future is uncertain. Their power will most certainly grow if Russia keeps its gains in Ukraine, however, as Putin will have demonstrated by success that Russia can afford to pay horrific costs and still win because the West will eventually back down. He and his successors will seek to apply that lesson to a larger game – the destruction of NATO.

The next Russian leader after Putin may or may not be like or worse than Putin if Russia loses in Ukraine. A Russian victory in Ukraine is a nearly guaranteed path to another Putin or worse, however, because of the political imperatives that an empowered nationalist community would create. Putin recently revived his expansionist narratives that deny Ukrainian territorial integrity as part of his presidential campaign, likely to appeal to these communities.[10] The nationalists will carry Putin's intent forward (the same intent toward Ukraine, the United States, and NATO that led to the full-scale invasion) and may even generate and pursue a more extreme version of this intent.

**The Kremlin is rallying Russians for a long-term fight with the West. The anti-Western narrative will become the foundation of the Kremlin's next national myth if Russia wins.** The narrative of confrontation with the West has increasingly defined Putin's rule.[11] Missing Putin's accumulating grudge is exactly why the West has been strategically surprised by Putin in the past.[12] The 2022 invasion has taken anti-American narratives in Russia to new heights.[13] Confrontation with the West has become the Kremlin's central domestic justification of this war and a key justification for its own increasingly authoritarian rule – after the initial justifications about denazification, demilitarization, etc. became less resonant. Anti-Western rhetoric in Russia comes in many forms: from the Kremlin talking heads discussing a potential nuclear strike on the US[14]; to Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's insinuations about a civil war in the US[15]; to constant explicit and thinly veiled threats against NATO states,[16] including Russian propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov's statements that one "Sarmat" [nuclear] missile is enough to drown the United Kingdom[17] [18]; to falsely blaming the United States for the Kremlin's failures, and even implying that the United States supports terrorism in Russia.[19] It is easy to dismiss these statements as lunacy. But narratives rule Russia, they have got us where we are today with Russia, and they will shape Russia's foreign policy for years to come. If Russia wins in Ukraine, these narratives will serve as the basis for the next Russian national myth.

**The Kremlin explicitly intends to reconstitute its large-scale warfighting capability – an effort that disproportionately depends on whether Russia keeps or loses its gains in Ukraine.** Russia has significantly depleted its military capability in Ukraine. But, unlike in 2022, the Kremlin today is acutely aware of its capability gap and seeks to close it. Russia is pursuing large-scale military reforms,[20] revamping its defense industrial base (DIB), investing in technological adaptation, and reconfiguring its international web of capability partners. The Russian military uses Belarus' trainers and training grounds to augment Russian force generation capabilities.[21] The Kremlin has accelerated its militarization of Russian society by instituting mandatory patriotic and military education in Russian schools, among other measures, as it seeks to expand Russia's future recruitment base via the indoctrination of its population.[22] [23] The Kremlin's progress is constrained by its decision to employ half-measures for DIB revitalization, as well as the invasion cannibalizing Russia's long-term military reforms.[24] But the potential for Russia to rebuild its military should not be underestimated if the Kremlin gets a reprieve or a win in Ukraine and can focus on reconstitution with full force, new

knowledge, stronger commitment, and a resilient web of military capability partners — like Iran and North Korea — that the Kremlin has codified throughout the invasion.

**Russia would absorb — not just control — any areas of Ukraine and Belarus it seizes, expanding Russia’s military footprint and resource base.** Russia has made alarming progress in normalizing a continuous military presence in Belarus, including securing unprecedented basing access and freedom of movement even beyond Belarusian military infrastructure.[25] A Russian victory in Ukraine would free up the Kremlin’s capacity to finalize its control over Belarus. But in such a case the Kremlin will likely go beyond control and use Russia’s ‘digestion’ playbook (its brutal rapid version in Ukraine and a softer slower version in Belarus) to erase local identity in any areas of Ukraine and Belarus that Russia manages to control.

The Kremlin is likely to pursue an outright absorption of Belarus and areas of Ukraine it manages to seize for two reasons. First, Ukraine and Belarus are core to Putin’s vision of the Russian world and also to Putin’s accelerated effort to reverse the Slavic demographic decline to prevent a looming social cohesion crisis in Russia.[26] (For similar reasons Putin has been obsessed with increasing the birth rate among Slavic Russians, russification of non-ethnic Russians, and deporting and reeducating Ukrainian children in Russia.)[27] Second, unlike in the pre-2022 world, Putin may assess that the only way to solve the Ukraine and Belarus problem for good (that is, to eliminate the risk that they might drift away from Russia in the future) is to absorb any areas Russia manages to control. Any areas in Ukraine or Belarus that Russia gets would also become permanent de facto or de jure Russian military basing. (Russia occupies 17.8 percent of Ukraine today, compared to 7.1 percent in 2021, and stands in this scenario — at a minimum — to absorb this territory to transform it into a lodgment from which to launch future offensives. The end of Western military aid would allow Russia to expand the area it controls dramatically.) Expanded Russian basing along NATO’s border will impose major risks, costs, and obligations on the alliance to defend against this expanded Russian posture.[28] Absorbing parts of Ukraine and Belarus would significantly increase Russia’s power, adding millions of people, including the skilled labor and industrial assets that remain and the territory not scorched, for the Kremlin to use for the reconstitution of the Russian military.

**A Russian victory in Ukraine would increase the likelihood of military action against other Russian neighbors.** The Kremlin still intends to re-establish control over its other neighbors.[29] Only now the Kremlin may *have* to rely on force to regain influence, as several former Soviet countries have tried to diversify away from Russia while the Kremlin has been preoccupied with Ukraine.[30] The Kremlin is acutely aware of this drift, with Kremlin outlets suggesting that Russia should invade Kazakhstan,[31] Medvedev threatening Georgia with Russia’s capability to annex South Ossetia and Abkhazia,[32] and Kremlin proxies trying to destabilize Moldova.[33] In a world in which Russia keeps its gains in Ukraine, little will stop Putin from integrating other territories it chooses to perceive as its sphere of influence by force via its hybrid schemas (e.g., breakaway republics) or an outright absorption.

**The Kremlin would resume its presently constrained effort to expand its global military footprint and broader influence.** The Kremlin still intends to expand its foothold in the Arctic and establish control over the Northern Sea Route, pursue broader influence and military basing in Africa, and it has maintained its campaign in the Balkans.[34] The Kremlin will pursue these and other efforts with new energy, legitimacy and resources if it solidifies its gains in Ukraine.

**The Kremlin would get closer to a real opportunity to break NATO.** Putin sought to use its invasion of Ukraine to break NATO — an objective he failed at but continues to pursue.[35] A key Russian threat to NATO is the risk of the Kremlin manipulating NATO into disavowing its principles.[36] NATO will be discredited if Russia keeps its gains in Ukraine and its defense guarantees will be undermined. NATO’s Article 5 — the commitment to mutual self-defense — is not a magic shield. It draws its legitimacy in part from the United States’ persistent decision to commit to its partners. American leaders must remember, as the Russians surely do, that any NATO state under attack can invoke Article 5, which states that in the case of an armed attack on a member state, each other member state shall take “forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary....” Article 5 does not automatically and legally commit every member of NATO to use military force to defend a member under attack. Each NATO state will have to decide how to act. The question of the resolve of all NATO member states to go to war in defense of a member under attack is thus paramount in the efficacy of Article 5 in deterring aggression. That efficacy, therefore, is not at all independent of the demonstrated willingness of the United States and other NATO states to stand by commitments to non-NATO states. If the United States abandons Ukraine, as it abandoned its partners in Afghanistan, the certainty that the United States would fight Russia in defense of, say, one of the Baltic States, will be harmed. **There is every reason to think that the United States will, in fact, honor its Article 5 obligations — but also every reason to fear that Putin and his successors will assess that it will not, in this scenario.** Deterrence would be weakened, and the risk of a NATO–Russia war would increase. Putin will go after NATO’s cohesion with new force, as in this scenario Russia will have an expanded military footprint on NATO’s border and an increased ability to target societal and political cohesion within the alliance. Russia will also accelerate its information operations trying to convince Americans that the United States simply does not need NATO — a campaign that

is more likely to succeed in a scenario where the Kremlin already managed to convince the United States to decrease or cease its support to Ukraine. **The future of NATO is bound up with the future of Ukraine much more tightly than most people understand.**

### *Degrading America's will*

**Russia targets what it perceives to be the US center of gravity — America's will to act. The Kremlin is using its information-based warfare together with military operations to persuade the United States to choose inaction in Ukraine. If Russia succeeds, it will not only result in catastrophic consequences for Ukraine, but also establish that the Kremlin's reflexive control[37] is an effective asymmetric warfare capability against the United States — for other US adversaries to use if they can master it.**

**The Kremlin seeks to strip America of its will to act. This is one of the very few ways, and certainly the fastest, for Russia to gain the advantage in Ukraine and restore its power globally.** The Kremlin perceives the United States to be the only sovereign state that stands — in terms of will and capability — between Russia and the Kremlin's 'rightful' place in Ukraine and globally. Moscow sees the United States as an enemy. The Kremlin thus seeks not just to compete with the United States but to diminish US power and global influence. The US Department of Defense (DoD) defines a center of gravity as a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.[38] The Kremlin has limits on its ability to compete with or meaningfully degrade US physical strength.[39] The Kremlin has been, therefore, focused on diminishing America's will to act, which it likely sees as America's center of gravity. Russia seeks to shape America's behavior to act against its interests and values, to strip the United States of the will to act altogether, and to convince the world that the United States can and should be dismissed.

The Kremlin is engaged in several lines of effort in support of this objective:

- 1) **Russia seeks to undermine Americans' belief in the value of action as such. Putin needs the United States to choose inaction in Ukraine, otherwise, Russia cannot win.** This model has worked for Putin domestically, where the Kremlin has established **inaction as a default response** by Russian citizens to external and internal stimuli. Putin convinced Russians that an alternative to him is either worse or too costly to fight for.[40] The Kremlin seeks to convince the United States that Ukraine's victory is unattainable, too costly or not in America's interest.[41]
- 2) **Russia seeks to undermine the perception of US credibility, power, leverage, and righteousness around the world to diminish America's ability to inspire others to act.** Even when preoccupied in Ukraine, Russia is investing in anti-US narratives, often supported by physical means, from Africa to South America.[42] The Kremlin is also targeting US allies and partners — a core pillar of US power — while simultaneously investing in an anti-US coalition in support of the same effort.
- 3) **The Kremlin is targeting global will to act.** Putin is working to create an international order that would simply accept, and never fight, Russian principles — such as the Kremlin's claimed right to own Ukraine and commit atrocities inside of Russia and globally at will. [43] Russian officials frame this effort as Russia's goal to “architect a fair global future.”[44]

**If Russia wins in Ukraine, US adversaries will learn that the United States can be manipulated into abandoning its interests in a winnable fight.** Russia cannot achieve its objectives in Ukraine if Ukraine's will to fight persists along with adequate Western support. The Kremlin has long understood that one of the very few ways to reconcile its goals and means in Ukraine is to slow Western support to buy Russia time to regain the battlefield initiative and rebuild capability (which is what happened in winter 2022–2023)[45] or, ideally, convince the United States to stop supporting Ukraine altogether. The Kremlin has invested heavily in this effort. A recent display of confidence by Russian propagandists and Putin amid hesitations in Western discourse likely indicates the Kremlin's perception that the United States is starting to act in Russia's interest.[46] If the West cuts its support for Ukraine, it will likely be because the United States let Russia shape its behavior — as the fundamentals of this war, such as US interests, capabilities, and Ukraine's will to fight, have not changed. The global anti-Western coalition will learn that it can asymmetrically defeat the West through manipulation and by outlasting it. **Learning how to diminish US decision superiority is a dangerous lesson for US adversaries, especially China, to learn.**

**This scenario would necessarily mean that one of the few Russian capabilities that poses a real threat to the United States — information-based warfare — has received a major boost.** Russian information-based warfare and reflexive control specifically have been among the stronger Russian capabilities and a core element of Russia's strategy against the United States for years.[47] Reflexive control is how Russia fights, and it is one of the true ways

in which Russia poses a threat to America beyond its nuclear arsenal. Russia's true sphere is its global information space — communities penetrated by the Russian narratives, including in the United States. If Russia wins in Ukraine, it will likely mean that Russia has managed to change America's perception of itself, its interests, and the risks and costs it is willing to incur — and for what purpose.

**Altering America's will is no small thing.** America is an idea. America is a choice. America is a belief in the value of action. US domestic resilience and global power come in no small part from people and countries choosing the United States and from Americans preserving their agency to act with intent. An adversary learning how to alter these realities is an existential threat — especially when ideas are that adversary's core weapon.

*A geostrategic environment that favors US adversaries*

**Allowing Russia to win in Ukraine would result in a reshaped global order that favors US adversaries and normalizes the following ideas:**

- Russia (and other states strong enough) deserves its perceived sphere of influence, regardless of its neighbors' will.
- Predators can redraw borders by force and victims must justify their right to exist.
- Western international institutions fail to fulfill the very missions they were built for.
- Russia can treat people in areas it controls any way it wants, including subjecting them to perpetual atrocities.
- The United States will face an international environment in which moral relativism further resurges and values further erode, fueled by arguments to the effect of *if Russia won, maybe they were not that bad, maybe it wasn't a black and white issue after all.*

These principles are antithetical to the rules-based international order, which remains a pillar of US prosperity and security.

*An ugly world*

**Russia winning in Ukraine would result in a world accepting of the Russian way of war and of life.** Billions of people are watching this war. They will not remember the nuances. They will remember the results, including the principles that humanity collectively confronted or tolerated. If Russia wins, many horrific practices that the Kremlin is trying to justify will be normalized. To name a few:

- Atrocities as a way of war that are not only not condemned but are often lauded by the Russian media, such as Russia's deliberate attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.[48]
- Brutality as a way of life — both as a means to control civilian populations and to discipline warfighters, like the horrific practice of late PMC Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin having his own men executed with sledgehammers and 'Prigozhin's sledgehammer' then becoming a lauded symbol within the Russian nationalist community.[49]
- A playbook for 'disappearing' or 'digesting' a nation through an identity and statehood eradication campaign that Russia is undertaking across occupied Ukraine, including forceful deportation of children.

If Russia wins, it will refocus its information efforts on rewriting history and launching narratives for why the abovementioned actions were justified through its information sphere of influence.

## RISKS OF ESCALATION

**The cost of failure for the United States in Ukraine is higher than the risks implicit in helping Ukraine win.**

**There will always be a risk of escalation, including when Putin invades Ukraine again if Russia is allowed to freeze the lines.** In this scenario, however, the United States would likely face an even larger escalation risk because Russia will be closer to a direct confrontation with NATO.[50] Basing US policy on the assumption that the United States can never run the risk of a nuclear escalation means the United States has subordinated its national security to any nuclear power. Unless the United States chooses to do so, accepting the risk now to decrease the chances of a larger risk of escalation in the future remains a prudent course of action.

**The West needs to recalibrate its perception of escalation based on the experience of the past two years.** The Kremlin has shifted its multiple stated 'red lines' and has not changed its response even to direct attacks on its prized Black Sea Fleet, as well as drone strikes and operations deep into Russia.[51]

**Putin remains a rational actor and often a risk-averse one.** He invaded Ukraine at a moment when he expected minimal resistance from Ukraine and the West as evidenced by his assessment that Russia could conquer Ukraine in a matter of days.[52] He also invaded only after he had ensured that his domestic grip on power was solid.[53] Both facts are indicative of a risk-aware actor. Putin also has been cautious about testing the limits of the Kremlin’s information control — as the stability of his regime in part depends on it. Putin still refuses to call Russia’s war a war and is not precisely defining his vision for the end of the war. The “special military operation” framing likely reaches the limit of what Putin assesses he can demand of the Russian people, as he tries to conceal the sacrifices that Russian people will need to make to support this war — i.e., mobilization. His assessment of his regime’s stability has self-confined him to suboptimal ways of fighting.

**The risk of nuclear war is inherent in any attempt to resist the aggression of any nuclear-armed state.** It will be manifest if Russia attacks Ukraine again or if it threatens or attacks NATO. It will be present if China attacks Taiwan. An American policy that refuses to accept any risk of nuclear use anywhere is a policy of permanent and limitless surrender to nuclear-armed predators. Such a policy will encourage their predation and it will also encourage other predators such as Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

## CONCLUSION

**A Russian victory in Ukraine would create a world fundamentally antithetical to US interests and values with an empowered anti-Western coalition.** US deterrence power and geopolitical standing will diminish. The cost of protecting the homeland and operating globally will rise, as will the number of national security issues the United States will have to tackle. More states and groups will challenge America at home and abroad. Latent adversarial intent is more likely to transform into action — which is how we got here in the first place, when Russia perceived the West to be weak.

**The asymmetry goes both ways: Ukraine is the lynchpin on which the future of Russia’s power hinges.** Russia’s ability to reconstitute; to maintain and increase its control and influence over its neighbors; the power of the Kremlin’s global narratives and ability to manipulate US will and perceptions; and the strength of Russia’s coalitions, including with US adversaries, all depend on whether Russia wins or loses in Ukraine. Helping Ukraine win would not only prevent Russia from erasing an independent nation and save the Ukrainian people from Russian atrocities and murder but would also land an asymmetric blow to the Russian threat and the anti-US coalition.

As long as Ukraine remains committed to defending itself against Russia’s aggression, the best course of action for the United States is to commit to the path of helping Ukraine win.

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[1] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/if-west-cuts-aid-ukraine-russia-will-win-if-west-leans-ukraine-can-win>

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