

# The Path Forward

## The Path Forward (Stephen E. Biegun)

A new Russia policy for the United States should be built around three goals: defeat, deter, and contain.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook many Russia experts out of a torpor. Until that moment, even the harshest critics of Russian leader Vladimir Putin's rule were resigned to simply managing relations with Russia under his undemocratic, criminal, destructive regime. Few considered the steps necessary to turn back Putin, much less contain or defeat him. Anathema for a return to the Cold War was widespread in the West, even as Russia pursued increasingly hostile foreign policies abroad. Putin used bluff and bluster, hybrid war, and outright aggression to intervene and destabilize many areas of the world — from the South Caucasus to Eastern Europe, to the Middle East, to North and Sub-Saharan Africa, to Latin America and the Caribbean — but for the most part none of these interventions was seen as sufficient to mobilize any greater reaction beyond diplomacy and sanctions. Putin was given a free hand, and he gladly played it.

From the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 until the current full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin's record has been one of uninterrupted global aggression aimed at expanding his control while undermining self-determination and democracy worldwide. Further adding to concerns about Russia, Putin has demonstrated a willingness to support and provide military assistance to other authoritarian and criminal regimes like Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela. Putin's friendship without limits with China has helped Putin's regime dodge the worst impact of economic sanctions imposed upon it after the invasion of Ukraine while reviving his military capabilities to inflict more destruction upon the people of Ukraine.

Understandably, much of the attention on Russia policy over the past nearly three years has revolved around how to best help defend Ukrainian independence. This is important. However, as the war drags on, and especially if

and when the war concludes, the United States is going to need a very different policy toward a Putin-led Russia. There will be no going back to the way things were. Years of sanctions, an inevitably uphill battle for war crimes accountability, and the near complete decoupling of the U.S. and Russian economies have irrevocably changed the course of U.S.-Russian relations. The sooner the U.S. political class and policy community come to grips with this reality, the sooner the United States can develop and resource a pragmatic and executable policy toward Putin's Russia that will defend our national security and, to the extent possible, deter further escalation or conflict with Russia.

A new Russia policy for the United States should be built around three general goals: defeat, deter, and contain.

### **Defeating the Russian War Machine**

Putin and the Russian military must be defeated in Ukraine. Nearly every challenge the United States faces has a nexus in or with Russia — Iran's nuclear ambitions, North Korean aggression, competition with or the risk of conflict with China, etc. — and will be easier to solve if Russia is defeated in Ukraine. Conversely, nearly every one of those same challenges is harder for the United States to solve if Russia is victorious in Ukraine.

Simply put, the goal in Ukraine's war of independence should be victory — and the sooner the better. The Ukrainians must be given the latitude to fight to win, not simply to fight as long as it takes. Putin expects Western resolve to fade over time as Russia gains new capabilities and recruits additional soldiers from a larger population to bring more mass to the war. He could be right. Russia now has nearly twice as many soldiers inside Ukraine than at the start of the invasion, and Putin's military industries are ramping up quickly, reportedly with Chinese assistance. The American people, the United States Congress, and for that matter other allied nations will not have the political stamina to indefinitely finance a war effort that seems designed simply to prevent the Ukrainians from losing and that appears fearful of allowing the Ukrainians to win.

In April 2024, with strong, bipartisan Congressional majorities in support, Congress appropriated \$61 billion in assistance to Ukraine. If war planners continue to seek to avoid escalation, manage the tempo of the war, and preserve resources for later, there will be a temptation to parse out these funds too slowly

as has been the case since the initial, large-scale invasion. Further complicating the delivery of weapons is the slow mobilization of the defense industrial base, and the fear of compromising U.S. readiness by drawing down stockpiles. If victory is the goal, these funds must be spent with far more urgency, without constraints on how or where they are used by the Ukrainian Army, and with the intention of achieving Russian defeat in Ukraine.

The U.S. and its allies should take advantage of this moment when Russia cannot constitute a threat sufficient to threaten its European neighbors while embroiled in a war with Ukraine. Military planners should give wider consideration to the readiness arguments that keep large amounts of war materiel from faster delivery to Ukraine. Readiness is a relative judgment of the scale of the threat versus the scale of the preparation for that threat. Worry about readiness requirements can be addressed by having larger stockpiles of equipment but can also be addressed by reducing the size of the potential threat. Russia's defeat reduces the threat to the United States and its allies, and quite possibly the threats from Iran, North Korea, and China as well. As the scale of the threats recede, the United States and its allies actually avoid having to build up and sustain ever larger weapons stockpiles. Russia's victory, on the other hand, will only embolden other authoritarians around the world, and at a minimum it will necessitate a massive defense build-up to protect the Eastern borders of NATO.

### **Preventing a Repeated Failure of Deterrence**

Nobody is to blame for the war in Ukraine other than Russian dictator, Vladimir Putin. His aversion to democracy, his deeply flawed understanding of Ukrainian nationhood, and his willingness to wantonly sacrifice the lives of his own soldiers as well as Ukraine's have produced the largest and bloodiest war in Europe since the end of World War II. But the West is not without fault of its own. The most fundamental failure of the Western response to Putin's preparation for war in Ukraine was and is a failure of deterrence. If the conflict is to be contained to Ukraine, deterrence must not fail again. In the aftermath of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, U.S. fear of escalation has been a persistent and overblown concern. It has led to self-deterrence and has sent reward signals to Vladimir Putin that invite him to continue to rattle his nuclear saber. Fortunately, a surprisingly strong response from America's NATO allies, combined with the completion of years-long planning to put real teeth in the defense and deterrence strategy overseen by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe,

has so far deterred Putin from extending the conflict beyond Ukraine. This should be instructive to American politicians and policymakers as well as our European allies; Putin can be deterred.

Even in the event of Russia's defeat, increased defense capabilities will be required along Russia's European borders to guard against future Russian aggression, or the disorder that might follow the collapse or overthrow of Putin's government. Meeting Alliance commitments through increased spending on defense by all NATO members, including the United States, will protect Russia's neighbors and deter Putin from further aggression. That same deterrent must also, once and for all, close off Vladimir Putin's desire to reabsorb Ukraine into a Russian imperial state. A repeat invasion of Ukraine will only be avoided by extending real security guarantees to Ukraine as a full member of NATO, as soon as possible.

### **Containing Russia Starts With a Clear-Eyed View on the Threat of Putin**

A Ukrainian victory over Russia will open the opportunity for peace negotiations to end the war — on Ukraine's terms. Once that is done, the work continues. All evidence suggests that a durable peace in Ukraine and beyond will require a policy of containment of Putin's destabilizing ambitions. To do this, sanctions must be maintained as strictly as possible, especially on Russian oil and gas exports. Export controls should be tightly enforced to prevent the Russian economy from growing. Even if Russia finds workarounds with partners like North Korea, Iran, and China, Russia's increasing economic and military dependence as a vassal of China will in time aggravate tensions between the two nations. And while sanctions alone have been insufficient to deter or roll back Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in time the debilitating economic misery caused by sanctions and export controls will deteriorate Russian quality of life and sharpen for the Russian people the consequences of Putin's misrule.

Above all, U.S. and allied policymakers must be vigilant to avoid a repeat of the failure of imagination that allowed Putin's to freely commit war crimes and destabilize strategic regions of the world without significant challenge for a decade and a half. Many European allies, even as late as the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, refused to accept what they saw with their own eyes, much less in the intelligence shared with them by the United States of America; that Putin intended to invade. If Putin is to be deterred from

further aggression, we must understand the moment that we are in. U.S. policy toward Russia should reflect what we have learned over the past 15 years. Quite simply, Putin has declared war on the West, but the West does not yet understand that we are at war with Russia. This has provided escalation dominance to Vladimir Putin, allowing him to threaten and bluff the United States and its Western allies into inaction, to slow the delivery of assistance to Ukraine, and to gain control of the strategic geography and economic spoils that fuel his corrupt regime. We will never successfully deter Putin if we do not have a clear-eyed view of the threat that he poses.

### **Don't Give in to Putin; Don't Give up on Russia**

Finally, as much as the West must never give in to Putin, we should also not give up on Russia. Western and U.S. relations with Putin have been irreparably harmed by his actions, but Putin is not eternal. That is not to say that all challenges end with his regime, nor that his successor will offer any immediate prospects for peaceful or friendly relations, but with change comes opportunity. The West must consider now how to advance better relations with a post-Putin Russia. This will not be easy, but it can be informed by avoiding the mistakes that three decades ago underpinned Russia's brief, failed experiment with democracy and friendly and cooperative relations with other democracies in Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

First, in their eagerness to welcome post-Soviet Russia fully into the community of democratic nations, Russia's Western partners overlooked any accountability of the Soviet security services and its patrons, which in time drove the deepening corruption and the erosion of democratic freedoms that were borne out of the Soviet Union's collapse. Second, working with Russian partners outside Russia who seek a better future for their country should be a high priority for the United States and its allies and partners. Russian political activists, civil society, and free media may be repressed and suppressed by Putin for the time being, but if history presents another opportunity for Russian democracy, they are far better prepared to deliver on this promise than their forebears were when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. If Western democracies are similarly prepared when that moment comes, a better future may be possible for all of us.

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