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Issue No. 523

June 1, 2022

Deterrence in Contemporary U.S.-Russian Relations

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This *Information Series* focuses on two related questions of contemporary interest: 1) What exactly are we trying to deter with Russia? And, 2) Are U.S. actions properly aligned to achieve deterrence objectives with Russia?

First, what exactly are we trying to deter with Russia? The goal, both implicit and explicit, of the United States vis-à-vis a hostile, great power such as contemporary Russia must be to deter all potential provocations that could materially affect U.S. interests because the value of deterring provocations, big and small, vice having to respond to provocations repeatedly, is enormous. The United States must have a broad set of defensive deterrence goals given the current U.S. relationship with Russia because the failure to deter at one level, for whatever reason (e.g., lack of attention, lack of will, lack of power), will likely encourage Moscow to believe it has freedom to provoke the United States at other levels. Thus, the failure to deter on one occasion will invite subsequent provocations. Historically, opponents have, on occasion, pointed to a previous U.S. failure to deter or an apparent lack of U.S. resolve as the

The author would like to thank Amb. Robert Joseph for his helpful comments. This *Information Series* is based on an earlier report by the author for the RSI as described here.



This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or the United States government.



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basis for their willingness to believe that they could act against the United States in relative safety.¹

Russia under Putin has a deep-seated expansionist, revanchist national goal to recreate Moscow's past imperium. It sees the United States as the impediment to its revanchist goals and thus has an imperative to challenge U.S. positions; provoking the United States is unavoidable if Moscow is to expand as it believes it must. A careful examination of numerous historical case studies concludes that: "To the extent that leaders perceive the need to act, they become insensitive to the interests and commitments of others that stand in the way of the success of their policy."² Given Russia's goals and worldview, Moscow is likely to deem it intolerable *not to act* to achieve its goals if it sees an opportunity and also to have an active bias in its perceptions of events: it will interpret events, rightly or wrongly, as validating what it must believe to be true about the U.S. deterrence posture to achieve its goals, i.e., that it can violate U.S. deterrence redlines without intolerable consequences. The Putin regime clearly seeks to create and exploit inadequacies in the U.S. deterrence posture that enable it to do so; it will seek to create those inadequacies and will likely see them where it hopes to find them.³ For the Putin regime, perceived U.S. weakness is likely to provoke Moscow and undercut U.S. efforts to deter rather than allay its fears and promote cooperation.

This dynamic almost certainly was an ingredient in the logic behind Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine and to extend the conflict following initial failures – decisions that do not alone indicate that Putin is "unhinged" as some commentators have suggested. Rather, it appears to reflect decision making that follows from a national, and likely personal, goal of national restoration in combination with a disdain for some U.S. deterrence measures.

In short, the failure to deter at one level of provocation will likely feed Moscow's expectation that it has greater freedom to provoke at other levels of provocation – as it must to achieve its cherished national goal of expansion. This cycle is apparent in Russia's repeated aggression against U.S. interests from 2008 to the present and explains why the U.S. deterrence of relatively minor Russian provocations in the future is important not only for the particular occasion, but for the deterrence signal it sends regarding future, potential provocations. Deterrence fails on those occasions when the U.S. power position and gravitas do not prevent Russia from consciously deciding to attack, directly or indirectly, the United States or a known U.S. interest.

There is, correspondingly, a broad range of Russian provocations that the United States must seek to deter. Some are implicit, others are long-standing and explicit, or are made explicit in the context of a crisis. The most obvious of these goals include the deterrence of kinetic attacks on U.S. and allied territory, and the threat or employment of nuclear weapons against the United States and allied countries under the U.S. extended deterrence umbrella. In this regard, U.S. deterrence goals vis-à-vis Russia are broader than NATO's because the United States has significant global interests well beyond deterring attacks on NATO territory. Consequently,



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some U.S. deterrence goals involving Russia could fail without a NATO deterrence failure. That said, any U.S. deterrence failure vis-à-vis Moscow is likely to make NATO deterrence goals more challenging.

Functionally, U.S. goals include the deterrence of attacks that are kinetic and non-kinetic, overt and covert quasi-military, and “gray area.” In short, the United States explicitly or implicitly must seek to deter all Russian challenges to U.S. material interests and thereby to encourage Russia and other prospective opponents to engage in cooperative, or at least benign behavior for fear of the consequences of provoking the United States – as opposed to Russia and others seeing any freedom to provoke the United States.

The deterrence of Russia’s attack on Ukraine and other similar states with which the United States has no apparent collective security treaty falls within the set of U.S. deterrence goals beyond those stemming from the North Atlantic Treaty or that are made explicit in long-standing bilateral treaties. It is, for example, near certain that if Russia were to mass troops to attack another non-NATO European country, such as Finland, the United States would announce explicitly that a U.S. goal is to deter such an attack, just as it did immediately prior to (and during) the Russian attack on Ukraine.

In sum, given hostile relations with Russia and Moscow’s self-expressed expansionist goals that must cross U.S. redlines and interests, the reality is that U.S. deterrence goals vis-à-vis Russia are, and should be, broader than those expressed explicitly in alliance communiques and official pronouncements, to include the deterrence of *all* hostile acts against the United States, allies and non-allied partners. That is a deterrence aspiration; the reality of what is reasonable to expect of deterrence in current circumstances is much more limited.

Second, are U.S. actions properly aligned to achieve deterrence objectives with Russia? The short answer is that U.S. actions may be adequate to achieve some of its deterrence goals vis-à-vis Moscow but are demonstrably inadequate to support others. Unfortunately, this hedged claim about the adequacy of the U.S. deterrence position to support U.S. goals is warranted. It is not possible to be fully confident of any claim of deterrence adequacy because the lack of an adequate deterrence position becomes obvious only when deterrence fails. Deterrence may appear to be functioning as desired and it may appear that there are no inadequacies in the U.S. deterrence position up until the point that deterrence fails, and the existence of some inadequacy becomes readily apparent. The number of factors that determine whether deterrence works as expected or fails can be enormous, and many of those factors are hidden and/or beyond U.S. control. Confident as Washington might be in its deterrence position to achieve a given goal, it frequently is not possible to forecast the failure of deterrence or, correspondingly, to know beforehand that an inadequacy exists in the U.S. deterrence position.



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There are numerous historical examples of deterrence failures (again, defined as the opponent's conscious decision to attack obvious U.S. interests, if not always explicit U.S. redlines), including vis-à-vis Moscow during the Cold War and since. In most cases, these deterrence failures came as surprises to Washington. For example:

- In 1962, the CIA reported that Khrushchev would likely be deterred from placing missiles in Cuba. Shortly thereafter he did just that.⁴
- In 1973, the Soviet Union supported Egypt and Syria in the initiation of the Yom Kippur War against Israel and declared its readiness to intervene directly in the conflict when the tide turned against the Arab states.
- In 2014, Russia invaded and illegally occupied parts of Ukraine – a step in Putin's vision following Moscow's 2008 attack on Georgia.⁵
- In February 2022, Russia again invaded Ukraine, in another move to realize Putin's vision, and has extended the conflict following initial failures.

Discussions of deterrence and preparations for deterrence can be more or less reasonably based, but it is critical to understand that projections about whether deterrence will or will not function as expected and, correspondingly, whether the United States is or is not adequately postured for deterrence are inherently speculative. The fundamentally speculative character of projections about deterrence and the adequacy of U.S. deterrence preparations cannot be eliminated wholly by devoting more attention to the subject—it is inherent in the subject matter. Only when deterrence fails to function does it become obvious that the U.S. deterrence posture *was* inadequate, and the absence of a Russian action does not demonstrate that the U.S. deterrence posture *is* adequate. And, when deterrence does fail, it may be uncertain, immediately or ever, precisely what was the inadequacy in the U.S. deterrence posture that led to deterrence failure. Opponents rarely, if at all, explain after the fact what was missing from the U.S. deterrence position that led them to decide to violate a U.S. deterrence redline and thus how U.S. deterrence preparations were inadequate in some way.

An additional key point in this regard is that the question of whether or not the United States is postured adequately to deter cannot be discussed intelligently apart from the specific deterrence goal, opponent and context of a particular prospective deterrence engagement. Generalizations on this subject are unlikely to be useful because opponents, their stakes, wills, levels of determination, and the political-military context vary greatly per engagement, and the functioning of deterrence will be shaped by these unique factors per engagement, perhaps decisively. For example, the United States may or may not be postured properly to deter Russia, depending on the specific stakes in contention, Russian goals and perceptions of cost and risk, and political-military details unique to that occasion. In short, discussions of how deterrence will function, and whether U.S. deterrence actions are adequate to support (or not) U.S. deterrence goals are, again, fundamentally speculative, but can be somewhat less so if the character of the specific opponent and context are understood and taken into account.



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What does this academic-sounding discussion regarding deterrence mean in practice? The United States must undertake to the extent feasible all reasonable moves to deter Russia from deciding to challenge U.S. interests, large and small, but it will not be obvious whether the United States is properly postured to deter Russia until *after* a failure of deterrence proves that Washington was inadequately prepared to deter. That is, the United States will not know if it is adequately postured for deterrence until a deterrence failure proves that it was not. The more informed the United States is about the specific context and likely Russian decision making (vice simply declaring that decision making to be “unhinged”), the more likely will the United States be able to recognize if its actions are aligned with its specific deterrence goals.

With these fundamental points about deterrence in U.S.-Russian relations (and more generally) firmly in mind, it is possible to speculate in an informed manner as to whether U.S. actions are adequate to support key deterrence goals vis-à-vis Russia.

As noted above, the United States may be properly postured to deter Russia from some provocations but is not postured adequately to deter it from other provocations that Washington would like to deter. This observation about the inadequacy of the U.S. deterrence position follows from the fact that the deterrence of Russia has demonstrably failed in some cases. This reality has been demonstrated most recently by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its extension of the conflict, and its reported cyber-attacks against the United States and NATO allies. Unfortunately, the United States took a “holiday from history” following the end of the Cold War (as stated by former DCI and Defense Secretary Robert Gates),⁶ and did not consistently maintain a deterrence position adequate for success in the broad range of deterrence goals discussed above.

What can be known in this regard is that despite intermittent U.S. actions to support deterrence, Moscow appears to believe it can expand its borders via the invasion of neighbors under the cover of nuclear threats, and potentially nuclear employment. Correspondingly, Moscow has engaged in explicit and implicit nuclear threats for over a decade. Russia reportedly put its nuclear forces on alert during the 2008 war with Georgia,⁷ and, after seizing Ukrainian territory in 2014, Russian military leaders reportedly raised the issue of limited Russian nuclear escalation should NATO intervene in response to Russian aggression in the Crimea.⁸ The Putin regime has again engaged in veiled and explicit nuclear threats against the United States, U.S. allies and non-allied partners during its current war in Ukraine, including Putin’s thinly-veiled threat to use hypersonic weapons that could be nuclear armed against NATO countries helping to arm Ukraine.⁹ This coercive use of nuclear threats, and possibly nuclear employment to defeat U.S. deterrence efforts, certainly appears to be an element in Russia’s broad nuclear doctrine regarding the use of nuclear weapons.



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Moscow's threatened use of nuclear weapons to provide cover for expansionist invasion is unprecedented – not having occurred even during the worst of the Cold War. Its current use of nuclear threats is said by some knowledgeable observers to be having the likely intended deterring effect on Washington. Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove has observed that:

The bottom line is we in the West, certainly my nation, and NATO, are completely deterred in this matter. We have been so worried about nuclear weapons and World War III that we have allowed ourselves to be fully deterred. And [Putin], frankly, is completely undeterred. He has switched into the most horrific war against the citizens of Ukraine, it is beyond criminal at this point.¹⁰

This disturbing comment presents Washington as being deterred by Moscow rather than Washington deterring Moscow. If so, it captures the point that there now is a critical gap in U.S. deterrence actions.

ADM Charles Richard, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, has testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that: "We are facing a crisis deterrence dynamic right now that we have only seen a few times in our nation's history," and, "The war in Ukraine and China's nuclear trajectory – their strategic breakout – demonstrates that we have a deterrence and assurance gap based on the threat of limited nuclear employment."¹¹ This is no overstatement. The gap follows from Russia's perception that it can overcome the U.S. deterrence position, at least for some expansionist purposes, via a combination of conventional force and coercive nuclear threats. Russia has demonstrated its willingness to risk attacking neighbors that are not part of the NATO alliance under the cover of coercive nuclear threats and Gen. Breedlove's observation indicates that this is an effective strategy to defeat U.S. deterrence goals. Of note in this regard are reports that in military war games when the opponent uses nuclear weapons, "Normally folks playing the U.S. side are at a loss as to what to do,"¹² and ADM Richard's comment that the U.S. military as a joint force "has not had to seriously consider what competing in an armed conflict with a nuclear armed opponent is like for 30 years."¹³

Not known, as yet, is whether Russia will risk invasion of a U.S. NATO ally under the cover of nuclear threat, or if it will resort to actual limited nuclear use, if necessary, in an effort to salvage a pending defeat and prevail in the Ukraine conflict. Some Russian state-controlled media is now threatening that, "Either this ends badly for all humanity or we win. There's no third option."¹⁴

A Russian decision to employ nuclear weapons could follow from Putin's view, as reported by CIA Director William Burns, that Putin "doesn't believe he can afford to lose" because he has "staked so much on the choices that he made to launch this invasion."¹⁵ Such an employment



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in the current war presumably would be meant to paralyze further Western support for Ukraine and thereby enable Moscow to achieve some form of victory in its “special operation.”

The outcome of the current war in Ukraine and Russia’s blatant use of coercive nuclear threats may help determine Russian expectations of its freedom to further provoke the United States in disregard of the U.S. deterrence position, and thus Moscow’s willingness to attack other non-allied European states or even NATO members. A successful operation in Ukraine (whether ultimately allowing Russia to absorb/control more pieces of Ukrainian territory or effectively all of Ukraine) would likely encourage the Putin regime to believe it can press further without fear of the intolerable consequences. There apparently is evidence that a Russian victory in Ukraine would be followed by aggression against Moldova.¹⁶

This existing gap in U.S. deterrence actions reflected in Russia’s obvious willingness to provoke the United States under nuclear cover is broader than the current war in Ukraine and precedes the war. But the war has made blatantly obvious Russian willingness to act despite U.S. deterrence actions, i.e., it has exposed U.S. deterrence gaps. *Russia appears to believe that it has a useful form of escalation dominance over the United States for at least some purposes.*

There are multiple actions the United States could take in an attempt to address this gap. Whether these steps will be undertaken by the United States or would succeed in addressing the gap is uncertain—the latter being dependent on unpredictable factors outside of U.S. control, including Russian determination and perceptions of U.S. determination and power. These steps are described only briefly here.

The first such step in the immediate context is to work with allies to provide Ukraine the materiel needed to ensure that Russia does not come away from Ukraine with anything that it can plausibly define as an expansionist victory – even by a Putin leadership that will be eager to define almost any outcome as a victory. Speaking of Moscow’s leaders, the now-former Russian Foreign Ministry official, Boris Bondarev, who resigned in protest over Russia’s aggression, has stated that, “Only a total and clear defeat that is obvious to everyone will teach them.”¹⁷ For U.S. deterrence purposes, the critical lesson is for the Russian leadership to conclude that a strategy of conventional aggression backed by coercive nuclear threats does *not* enable Moscow to defeat U.S. deterrence strategies and win expansionist wars. The prospective lesson that Moscow’s pursuit of this expansionist strategy in Ukraine led to a local defeat would likely be optimal for future U.S. deterrence purposes in Europe and Asia. The alternative could encourage Russia and perhaps China to engage in future expansionist aggression. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reportedly has identified the recovery of all occupied territories as a goal of this war.¹⁸ At this point, now denying any plausible definition of an expansionist victory to Moscow in this conflict, i.e., victory denial, is likely important for future U.S. deterrence purposes in Europe and Asia.



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A second and longer-term step is to encourage Russian expectations in general that limited Russian nuclear threats (regional or strategic) will *not* paralyze U.S. *will or capability* to counter Russian aggression in strength. Such a deterrence message may be absent from current U.S. actions in Ukraine, at least as yet. Indeed, as Gen. Breedlove emphasizes, the unfortunate opposite message may be in play. A key deterrence goal then is to counter, to the extent possible, the condition described by Gen. VanHerck, Commander of U.S. Northern Command: “If our competitors believe that they can destroy our will or ability to surge forces from the United States because of a perceived inability to defeat their attacks, they will be emboldened to aggressively pursue their strategic interests. In essence, this situation creates an opportunistic gap between our nuclear strategic deterrent and conventional deterrent capability for potential adversaries to exploit.”¹⁹

There are force posture moves the United States could take over time that could help to deny Moscow such a belief—moves that even a Russian leadership biased to believe what it wants to believe would be likely to understand. To the extent that U.S. political will and prospective NATO military operations are vulnerable to Moscow’s limited nuclear threats or use, Russia is encouraged to believe that its limited nuclear threats or strikes enable it to overcome U.S. deterrence aspirations and actions. Russian confidence in its ability to do so likely is built on any such vulnerability. For deterrence purposes, that vulnerability to limited nuclear threats must be foreclosed, i.e., U.S. political will and military potential must be sustainable in the face of limited first-use threats and following Russian limited nuclear first use—regional and strategic. If this is not the case, there will be an enduring gap in U.S. deterrence actions that will likely encourage Russian provocations.

Summary

In summary, U.S. deterrence goals vis-à-vis Russia are, and should be broad, including those goals that are explicitly expressed and many that are not. For deterrence purposes, no provocation that threatens U.S. material interests should be considered unimportant because the failure to deter Russia at one level will encourage Moscow to provoke the United States at other levels, i.e., deterrence failure. In addition, U.S. actions clearly are insufficient to deter Russia for some purposes, as has been fully demonstrated by Russian behavior for more than a decade. Whether Russia will consider itself free to provoke the United States further, possibly including future attacks against NATO members and non-members, will be shaped by U.S. actions pertaining to the current war and longer-term actions that focus on protecting U.S. political will and NATO material capabilities.

¹ Saddam Hussein’s dismissive view of U.S. deterrence goals prior to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, for example, apparently was established in large measure by the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and its subsequent withdrawal



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from Lebanon in 1983. See, Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Chapter 2; see also, Donald Kagan, "Honor, Interest, and Nation-State," in *Honor Among Nations*, ed., Elliot Abrams (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1998), p. 19.

² Peter Karsten, Peter Howell and Artis Frances Allen, *Military Threats: A Systemic Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Success* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. xii.

³ This discussion involves the application of psychology and cognitive principles to the analysis of deterrence because they are central to leadership perceptions and decision making. Discussions of deterrence that do not take such considerations into account are more likely to be misleading than enlightening regarding deterrence.

⁴ Sherman Kent, "A Crucial Estimate Relived," in *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates, Collected Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), accessed at <www.cia.gov/csi/books/shermankent/toc.html> on August 9, 2000.

⁵ Fewer than 30 days prior to the 2014 Russian invasion, the Director of National Intelligence's *Worldwide Threat Assessment* presentation was devoid of any suggestion of such a Russian threat to Ukraine. See, James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, *Statement for the Record, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2014*, available at, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Intelligence%20Reports/2014%20WWTA%20%20SFR_SSCI_29_Jan.pdf.

⁶ Robert Gates, "We Need a More Realistic Strategy for the Post-Cold War era," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/03/why-ukraine-should-force-a-total-overhaul-of-our-national-security-strategy/>.

⁷ Robert Joseph, "Commentary," speech at National Defense University, Washington, D.C., *Deterrence Imperatives: Capabilities and Education*, October 8, 2015. See also Frank Miller, "Keynote Address," U.S. Strategic Command Deterrence Symposium, July 29, 2015, available at https://www.stratcom.mil/speeches/2015/137/Keynote_2015_USSTRATCOM_Deterrence_Symposium/.

⁸ Damien Sharkov, "Russia Has Threatened Nuclear Attack, Says Ukraine Defence Minister," *Newsweek*, September 1, 2014, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-threatened-nuclear-attack-says-ukraine-defence-minister-267842>; Ben Hoyle, "Putin: Try to Take Crimea Away and There'll be a Nuclear War: Secret Meeting of Kremlin Elite and US Top Brass Reveals Russian Threat to West," *The Times (London)*, April 2, 2015, available at <http://search.proquest.com/professional/login>; and, Zachary Keck, "Russia Threatens Nuclear Strikes Over Crimea," *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2014, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/russia-threatens-nuclear-strikes-over-crimea/>.

⁹ "Russia's Response will be Lightning-Fast in Case of Dangerous Meddling in Ukraine Events - Putin," *Interfax (Russia)*, April. 27, 2022, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/27/putin-warns-of-lightning-response-to-intervention-in-ukraine-a77514>.

¹⁰ Quoted in, Vazha Tavberidze, "Former NATO Commander Says Western Fears Of Nuclear War Are Preventing A Proper Response To Putin," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 7, 2022 available at, <https://www.rferl.org/a/breedlove-nuclear-fears-west-deterred/31791020.html>.

¹¹ Quoted in, Bryant Harris, "U.S. nuclear commander warns of deterrence 'crisis' against Russia and China," *Defense News Online*, May 4, 2022, available at, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/05/04/us-nuclear-commander-warns-of-deterrence-crisis-against-russia-and-china/>.

¹² Quoted in, Anna Mulrine Grobe, "'Battlefield Nukes' in Ukraine? A Low but Complex Threat," *Christian Science Monitor Online*, April 11, 2022, available at <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2022/0411/Battlefield-nukes-in-Ukraine-A-low-but-complex-threat>.



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¹³ Jim Steele, “Events require U.S. to refocus on nuclear capabilities, STRATCOM commander says,” University of Alabama in Huntsville, May 19, 2022, available at <https://www.uah.edu/news/items/events-require-u-s-to-refocus-on-nuclear-capabilities-stratcom-commander-says#>.

¹⁴ Quoted in, Giulia Carbonaro, “Russian TV Says Nuclear War Only Alternative to Russia's Victory in Ukraine,” *Newsweek Online*, May 24, 2022, available at, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-tv-says-nuclear-war-only-alternative-russia-victory-ukraine-1709539>.

¹⁵ Lawrence Richard, “Putin believes ‘doubling down’ key to winning in Ukraine, thinks he ‘can’t afford to lose,’ *Fox News*, May 8, 2022, at <https://www.foxnews.com/world/putin-doubling-down-win-ukraine-cant-aford-to-lose-cia-chief-warns>.

¹⁶ See Mary Ilyushina, Cate Cadell, Dan Lamothe, David Stern and Timothy Bella, “Hints of Ambitions Beyond Ukraine,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2022, p. 1.

¹⁷ Quoted in, “Not the Time for a Deal,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/05/26/now-is-not-time-see-deal-with-putin/>.

¹⁸ See, Jorge Ortiz and John Bacpn, “Zelensky Rejects Kissinger Plan to Concede Territory to Russia,” *USA Today*, May 25, 2022, available at, <https://news.yahoo.com/kissinger-urges-ukraine-concede-disputed-071841011.html>.

¹⁹ Glen D. VanHerck, “Deter in Competition, Deescalate in Crisis, and Defeat in Conflict,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, 101, 2nd Quarter 2021, p. 6, available at, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2553378/deter-in-competition-deescalate-in-crisis-and-defeat-in-conflict/>.

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