

Answering your questions on the Russia–Ukraine conflict

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has left many of us with questions about what Vladimir Putin wants, why he is taking action now and what Europe and the US might do to stop him.

*At our recent event '**Making sense of the Russia–Ukraine conflict**', Professor Mark Harrison, expert on Russia and the Cold War, answered many of the most pressing questions surrounding these issues.*

He has now put together responses to those questions he wasn't able to answer fully during the discussion.

I'm interested to hear Prof. Harrison's take on Putin's deep-rooted view on NATO's expansion and why now has Putin decided to pursue this military operation. (See the following [video of Putin's full speech](#) made on 24/02/22.)

- Andrew

It appears to be the case that in 1990 US Secretary of State James Baker (and others) gave verbal assurances to Gorbachev that NATO would not expand eastward. The assurances were noted, but never formalized in international agreements. The same evidence shows that existing NATO members remained extremely cautious about eastward expansion: the pressure for expansion came from the applicants, who saw a need for collective security against Russia. Thus, Baker failed to consider that the smaller countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltic would exercise the right to seek security where they wished, and that other NATO members would have a say on whether to admit them.

NATO has not expanded eastward since 2007, so the question remains how to explain the timing of Putin's December 2021 ultimatum to NATO and the Russian attack on Ukraine now in progress. We can only speculate because Kremlin politics are now entirely secret. There has been no extended public debate in Russia of the rationale for Putin's ultimatum or the case for invasion. Compare that with the agonized public debates that took place in the US and in Western Europe prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Of course, the same example shows that democracies too can miscalculate and make terrible mistakes.

The speech you note is interesting – not the one I thought you had in mind originally. I didn't have time to watch it all. In what I saw, Putin argued that (a) America has committed crimes against other countries and specifically against Russia (b) America exercises an ideological dictatorship ("Empire of Lies") over all NATO countries and now also over Ukraine (c) therefore Russia is entitled to do what it wishes with Ukraine. I leave it to you to decide where this leaves the rule of law and the rights of smaller countries.

How does a country like Ukraine join NATO and EU while allowing Russia to feel safe? Is there a way for Ukraine to get out of the buffer state trap?

- Adomas

Russia has no reason to feel threatened. But Putin might feel differently. As long as bordering countries have competitive elections that do not guarantee the re-election of the incumbent, there is the risk that Russians might find this an attractive example.

View from the other side? NATO has been expanding Eastwards. NATO has sent weapons to Ukraine (even installed bioweapons labs). So why pick on Putin?

- Anonymous

NATO has not 'expanded eastward' since 2007, and then only because Russia's neighbours were pressing for collective security against Russia. 'Bioweapons': I have no first-hand knowledge of this matter. At second hand, I note that the FSB (and the KGB before it) have 'form' in sponsoring disinformation about non-existent Western biological warfare experimentation, including the alleged origins of AIDS and COVID.

US thinking tends to see nuclear arms as non-military capabilities, because they do not further military (clear, direct, objectively-defined) objectives.

- Anonymous

In the time of Mutual Assured Destruction, there was a clear gap between Western and Soviet concepts of the utility of nuclear weapons. In NATO doctrine, nuclear weapons were primarily a deterrent, on the basis that global thermonuclear war was not winnable. In Warsaw Pact doctrine, in contrast, even a nuclear war would end in the victory of one side, and it would therefore have to be fought by all means. The advent of miniaturized nuclear weapons blurred these lines, but they still exist in the sense that Russia continues to integrate its nuclear weapons into conventional wargames and drills.

Part of the political use of nuclear weapons is reinforcing the impression of insanity (on both sides during Cold War).

- Anonymous

Calling something insane is more usually a barrier to understanding than a help.

If Putin seeks to unite dispersed Russian peoples, then how likely are future Russian invasions of the likes of Moldova and other neighbouring countries?

- Anonymous

These must be considered possible, although not immediately threatened. It is important to understand that Russian capabilities are not limited to direct invasion, and Russia regularly engages in cyber attacks, disinformation, and so on.

This attack is undoing much of the good (economic, cultural) work Putin has done for the past 20 years; why did Putin still go ahead? (Miscalculation?)

- Stuart

Progress under Putin has been mixed: Russian society has stabilized, and incomes and economic and cultural opportunities have improved, but with stability has also come the entrenchment of rent seekers, high levels of corruption and inequality, and the political monopoly of an authoritarian leader.

Question: why is West so into discussion of non-expansion of NATO claim with no written evidence and ignore the violation of the Budapest memorandum ?

- Anonymous

The Budapest memorandum, signed by Russia, the UK, and the US, guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity in return for Ukraine giving up the former Soviet nuclear weapons stationed on its territory. The Russian occupation of Crimea and of parts of the eastern provinces violated this agreement in the clearest possible way. This is one reason why Ukrainian neutrality is now such a difficult issue. Neutrality can be armed or guaranteed. Russia appears to have ruled out armed neutrality for Ukraine by demanding Ukrainian demilitarization. But since Russia violated the Budapest memorandum, any Russian guarantees would seem to be worthless.

How do we square the perceived need for military action from the West (alongside sanctions) with the threat of the use of nuclear weapons?

- Anonymous

This is very difficult. I do not have much of an answer. What I see is that in a world of increased military threats, Britain and other European NATO members need to invest in deterrence at every level – not only nuclear but conventional, cyber, and so on.

What is being secured? Regime, vital (economic, territorial) interests, system of government, social model? 'Necessary to destroy the country to save it'

- Jonathan

I am not sure what conclusion you draw, but a general point is that total security is an impossible goal. The only way for a country to eliminate every external threat is to conquer the world.

What action by "the West" could make Putin de-escalate and withdraw from Ukraine, in your view? (edited)

- Kirill

I do not think the West can achieve this. It's not impossible that Ukraine itself can achieve it, but there is also the risk that Putin will simply apply more violence.

Why were Western politicians carefree about the propaganda on Russian TV that 'evil West is to blame' & 'Ukraine does not exist' supported by Putin's essay? (edited)

- Arman Graham

Unfortunately, many people tend to dismiss such statements as 'mere' propaganda. They do not understand that Putin was expressing a view of Russia's national identity and national interests that would have real consequences.

You mention European failure. Should the west have taken action, such as sanctions, when Russia intervened in a similar way in Syria?

- Bishnu

I am sceptical that economic sanctions can be productive in a crisis. We over-use them, because they seem like a cheap way of solving problems, but the outcome might be that the problem isn't solved or is made worse.

Is it reasonable that western media is focussing on the invasion in the Ukraine pretty much to the exclusion of all else?

- Anonymous

The US General Dwight Eisenhower said that what is urgent is rarely important and what is important is rarely urgent. Our public discourse tends to be dominated by what is urgent, at the expense of what is important. Compare Ukraine and climate change. The war in Ukraine has driven climate policy from the headlines. Climate change is not so urgent, but it will become more urgent with time. By the way, I do not think this is specific to western media; you will find it everywhere. It is an example of what Daniel Kahnemann called the predominance of 'fast' over 'slow' thinking.

Even when Putin is gone, isn't it vital that Russian people feel that they've been allowed to make reparations, show good faith, etc.

– Jonathan

Post-war reconciliation can be difficult but is very important. Coventry has much useful experience in this, having been twinned with Dresden after World War II.

Are Putin's miscalculations concerning military strategy and the Western reaction a sign that autocratic regimes struggle to gather accurate information?

– David

There are two issues. An autocratic regime can fail to gather accurate information about its own society because the citizens falsify their own preferences: they will signal loyalty falsely, in case a disloyal signal invites repression. Knowing this, the dictator must then suspect everyone of being a potential enemy, even (or especially) if they are outwardly loyal. But why should an autocratic regime fail to gather accurate information about other societies? This might result from a cognitive bias. The dictator generally equates criticism with disloyalty, and he may therefore assume that those who are critical of the government in a democracy are also disloyal. This may cause an autocratic regime to underestimate the capacity of a democracy to unite in face of an external threat.

But this is all predicated on Putin remaining in power? Will the Russian people not force Putin out?

– Andrew

It is possible, but not predictable. If it were predictable, it could be prevented. Putin and those around him will do what they can to prevent a popular uprising. If those around Putin turn against him, the first move is also the most dangerous.

Ukraine demonstrates that the victors fail to secure a 'good' outcome from conflict. How do we combat this in future – there will be other Putins elsewhere.

– Roberta

I am pessimistic that war can be eliminated simply by learning lessons from history. In the longer term, it seems, destructive wars are indeed becoming less frequent. However, the process is neither linear nor deterministic.

Why don't we talk more about the > 13,000 people killed by the Ukrainian regime in the Donbass between 2014 and 2022 (recognised by the UN)?

- Anonymous

We don't talk about this because there is no evidence that it has happened.

Why did the UK and France don't put any pressure on the Ukrainian government to implement the 2015 Minsk agreements?

- Anonymous

The first requirements of the Minsk agreements were a ceasefire and 'withdrawal of illegal armed groups and military equipment as well as fighters and mercenaries' (of which the key contingents were Russian troops and weapons) from Ukrainian territory. Russian troops have repeatedly violated the ceasefire and have not been withdrawn.