The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Blinded by Bias

Western Policymakers and Their Perceptions of Russia before 24 February 2022

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Preface by Beatrice Heuser

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"Small wonder, then, that this century sunned itself in its own accomplishments and looked upon each completed decade as the prelude to a better one. There was as little belief in the possibility of such barbaric declines as wars between the peoples of Europe as there was in witches and ghosts. Our fathers were comfortably saturated with confidence in the unfading and binding power of tolerance and conciliation. They honestly believed that the divergencies and the boundaries between nations and sects would gradually melt away into a common humanity, and that peace and security, the highest of treasures, would be shared by all mankind."

Stefan Zweig,
The World of Yesterday [*Die Welt von Gestern*], 1942

Preface

by Beatrice Heuser

Much attention has been given in the literature on International Relations to how to deter aggression. This fascinating study seeks to elucidate the run-up to the full-scale conventional invasion by Russia of Ukraine in the winter of 2021-2022. It asks, why was the danger of an all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine not recognised by all NATO Member States, and how did this contribute to preventing their governments from taking a more robust stance to deter Russia, than merely threatening sanctions. As Florence Gaub has noted, it tends not to be deficient reporting but the misreading of evidence that leads to strategic intelligence failure.[i]

It is this misreading of evidence that is central to this study. It is mostly due to interpretational, cognitive biases, a term we owe to psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, later popularised by Kahneman.[ii] The concept of such is not new: long before the term was coined, the exploration of misunderstandings in the decision-making that led up to key wars was a standard part of the historiography of international crises and the origins of war, albeit as one of several. Other factors feed into the (mis)interpretation of evidence: government structures and processes, but also soft factors like individual mindsets, national mentalities, and organisational culture. Historical experiences feed into it, unspoken assumptions, and intellectual shortcuts made when other events were pressing. As Kahneman and Ralf Dobelli noted, if we examined any situation entirely afresh, we would never get to the end of our work, so we use shortcuts.[iii] The study before us illustrates that such shortcuts, based on biases, were made aplenty in the interpretation of incoming evidence that Russian military was being amassed on the borders of Ukraine in the guise of exercises, already in 2020, and then again in the autumn of 2021, and left there, unusually, in the winter of 2021/22.

Of the multiple biases for which this study presents its evidence, three deserve particular emphasis. Practitioners would do well to identify them, perhaps in their own thinking, probably in their own organisations, definitely in their own societies. One is the extreme reluctance that European societies today had and still have to face this reality: near us, and owning missiles that can destroy our countries, there are regimes that are not just more tolerant than us of the risk of war (and that value the prosperity and security of their populations less than we do), but will actually deliberately start wars. There was the same reluctance on the part of the British and the French in the 1930s to recognise the danger posed by Hitler and Mussolini. This bias of wishing away uncomfortable truths as they are too distressing or would force us to make great changes and sacrifices (at least of an economic sort) is what psychologists call "denial". It goes a long way to explain how Western practitioners could at once remember the fear they had in late 2021 and at the beginning of 2022 that the situation might escalate into war, and their paradoxical convictions that Putin would not go that far.

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i Florence Gaub, Zukunft (dtv, 2023), 126.

ii Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1124–31; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

iii Rolf Dobelli, The Art of Thinking Clearly, trans. Nicky Griffin (Harper Collins, 2013).

This is explained also in terms of the mirror-imaging bias. Even the Biden administration shared the incredulity that Putin would give up what prosperity had been achieved in Russia for the sake of romantic ideas about recreating a greater Russia built on national conservatism, Orthodox spirituality, and the subjugation of surrounding peoples. This proclivity to underestimate inspirational ideas that to us may seem irrational is widespread among the general public in the West, but also in government institutions. Even academics are prone to it, just as many cannot get their minds around the fact that Medieval men risked (and many, lost) their lives by setting out on crusade not for filthy lucre but to save their souls, that volunteers joined up in droves to fight for king or emperor and country in 1815 or 1870 or 1914, that suicide bombers even exist as they die not for material gains but for ideas, or that Putin would start a war that he was warned would reduce the standard of living of Russians by 10% if not more.

The third is the repetition fallacy: because US and British intelligence interpretation on Saddam Husseyn's Iraq and its supposed programme of building weapons of mass destruction was wrong, Continental decision-makers distrusted Anglo-American intelligence on quite another matter, more than twenty years later. This degree of distrust even when much intelligence was shared in 2021/22 is remarkable, especially after particularly the British intelligence apparatus went through massive self-criticism and reform.

Then there are a couple of notable cultural misunderstandings which emerge from this study, which are not entirely generalisable but seem to form a pattern at least for Russian, and potentially also for other authoritarian, regimes. One is the importance of an ex-cathedra pronouncement on History by a head of State. Western analysts in general initially paid little attention to Putin's article of June 2021 on the relationship between Ukraine and Russia. In our cultures, and notwithstanding Churchill's histories which earned him a Nobel Prize in literature, or de Gaulle's "certain idea of France" and of her history, politicians dabbling in amateur historiography are smiled upon. Few like Sir Alex Younger, who had spent his career watching Russia, realised immediately that Putin's article announced the massive escalation in Russia's efforts to incorporate Ukraine into Russia's neo-imperial sphere.[iv] More attention has been probably rightly paid to Xi Jinpin's speech of the same year on what China's regime intends to achieve by 2049.[v]

The other cultural misunderstanding derives from a habit of lying, possibly particular to eastern European autocracies, which is distinct from the lying with which politicians are often caught out in Western democracies. Unfulfilled election pledges are common, as are politicians covering up personal misdeeds, whether these be tax evasion, some measure of corruption, sex scandals or partying during covid lockdowns. What electorates in Western democracies are not used to is blatant lies, of the sort of "Nobody here is intending to build a wall",[vi] or the denial of any intention to invade Ukraine, made by Putin to Joe Biden in early December 2021 and again to Boris Johnson at the end of January 2022.[vii] It seems that in Russia today, rather than shaking the public's faith in the morals of its leadership, such lying to foreigners is taken to be a sign of astuteness and cleverness, and inspires popular admiration for Putin for having somehow tricked the bully (NATO, the US, the West), and got away with it.

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iv *Former Head of MI6: How The Ukraine War Will End & What If China Invades Taiwan? (Sir Alex Younger)*, The Rest Is Politics: Leading, 2025, 01:04:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ra5WbypGnmE.

v 'Full Text of Xi Jinping's Speech on the CCP's 100th Anniversary', Nikkei Asia, 7 January 2021, https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/full-text-of-xi-jinping-s-speech-on-the-ccp-s-100th-anniversary.

vi Walter Ulbricht, 15 June 1961, the building of the Wall in Berlin started on 13 August.

vii As is noted in Chapters 8 and 9. Bob Woodward, *War* (Simon & Schuster, 2024), 96; Boris Johnson, *Unleashed* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2024), 531.behind-the-scenes narrative exploring the intricate dynamics of Ukraine, the Middle East, and the American presidency, offering unparalleled insights into political intrigue and global strategy from one of the most authoritative voices in political journalism today. War is a "harrowing, riveting" (The New York Times

While US diplomats in negotiations with their Russian interlocutors observed less commitment in late 2021, Dutch, and especially French and German, diplomats still assumed even in mid-February 2022 that ongoing diplomatic negotiations, for example in the NATO-Russia Council, meant that Putin could still be pulled back from the brink.[viii] We must conclude that either his diplomats did not know of his plans, in which case we must never again take it for granted that any part of the Russian government and its representatives abroad truthfully represents and explains Putin's intentions.[ix] Or else that – to put it more politely – the culture of dissimulation extends to all parts of the Russian government and its representations, which should lead us to the same reservations in listening to them. While some massaging of the truth and euphemistic narratives are the very essence of good diplomacy, the Russian way of diplomacy is clearly "next level".

Analysts and other practitioners' mantra should be to start by seeking an unbiased understanding of an adversary, of their world view and intentions, rather than assuming that we can project our own thinking, our risk-aversion and our relative satisfaction with the current world order, upon them. Just because we have been trading and negotiating together for the last 35 years has not meant that they have come to think like us. Strategy making must thus start with understanding the other side, building our strategy around the best ways to counter their intentions in as far as they are illegitimate, and to see what means we have and need to do so, rather than starting with we are best at, or have kit and training for.

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xiii Leaving aside here that Ukrainian misperceptions also played a crucial role in forming Continental European perceptions, as is noted in Chapters 4 and 10.

ix During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet ambassador to Washington, A.F. Dobrynin, was famously kept out of the loop of his government's decisions and confidently denied that there were Soviet missiles on Cuba – coincidence or continuity?

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Executive Summary

In the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the possibility of a large-scale conventional war on the European continent encountered widespread disbelief in the capitals of many NATO allies. This was true despite the fact that Russia had repeatedly signalled both its refusal to recognise Ukraine as a sovereign state and its willingness to use force to assert this view. In Western capitals, a state of incredulity about Russia's stated intents and purposes co-existed alongside deep concerns about taking actions that might provoke Russia. Overall, this led to a partial and belated recognition of the seriousness of the threat posed by Russia, inhibited more forceful responses, and fuelled reluctance to provide Ukraine with the support necessary to deter a Russian invasion.

In contrast to the failure to take the threat posed by Russia seriously was the shift in attitude after the full-scale invasion became a reality. The impact of the invasion on the perceptions of Western policymakers, including elected political leaders, their advisors, as well as those working at the departments of foreign affairs, defence and elsewhere, was enormous. Not just the public at large but also the political establishment *rediscovered* war. The sudden turnaround begs the question as to why the possibility of war and the clear and present danger posed by Russia was downplayed in the perceptions of policymakers and the public at large in the run-up to the invasion.

This study delves deeper into this question. It examines how Western policymakers perceived the threat posed by Russia and the demands presented by Putin, and analyses the biases that affected their perceptions and subsequently informed Western responses. It casts its net more widely than closely related studies of "analytic failure" that reflect more narrowly on the assessments of the Western strategic community, including intelligence analysts, academics and think tankers, because analytic failures take place in a wider societal context within which the perceptions of people, whether they are intelligence analysts, experts, political leaders, political advisors or policymakers, are shaped by psychological biases that affect the ways in which they perceive the world they live in.

This study employs a multi-method approach consisting of the analysis of official documents and media reports of the events leading up to and during the crisis, an assessment of the relevant academic literature related to coercive diplomacy, political psychology and crisis decision-making, and 44 in-depth interviews with high-level officials at NATO Headquarters (HQ), in France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. These officials worked at the offices of presidents, prime ministers or the secretary-general, at ministries of defence and foreign affairs, as well as in embassies in Russia and Ukraine. They were either directly involved in the policymaking processes or close witness to it in the years and months leading up to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Even if Russia's invasion may not have been preordained, it is puzzling that the possibility of a full-scale invasion was met with disbelief because there were plenty of reasons to conclude that Russia constituted a clear and present danger. In fact, the Russian threat to Ukraine satisfied all conditions to be considered credible according to three salient explanations of threat credibility in the academic literature succinctly summarised as (1) interests, (2) capabilities, and (3) reputation based on past behaviour. In short, Russia had repeatedly and

clearly asserted its interests, it had developed the military capabilities which had been put in place, and it had shown its proclivity to use military force, not just in other theatres but also against Ukraine.

Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, threat perception varied widely across the NATO alliance. Despite efforts by the US and the UK governments to persuade allies of an impending invasion with classified and declassified intelligence, many European policymakers were not convinced of the likelihood of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Only the Five Eyes community and the governments of those European states in close geographical proximity to Russia considered a full-scale Russian invasion to be likely. In contrast, many Western-European states and those with closer ties to Russia did not. Based on their threat perception of Russia, their assessment of the likelihood of an invasion, and the type of support they provided to Ukraine, NATO allies can be distinguished into four groups: Doves, Deer, Buzzards, and Wolves:

- Doves perceived neither an existential threat from Russia nor a high likelihood of a full-scale invasion until very close to day zero. Instead of providing military support to Ukraine, these countries focused on diplomatic solutions and deterrent threats that were limited to the imposition of economic sanctions. Doves included Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Türkiye.
- Deer saw Russia as an existential threat and perceived the likelihood of an invasion to be high. Fearing inadvertent escalation, they only provided non-military support to Ukraine. Deer included Norway and Romania.
- Buzzards did not consider Russia to constitute an existential threat but considered a full-scale invasion likely and provided military support to Ukraine. Buzzards included Canada, Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and the United States.
- Wolves, in turn, considered Russia to be an existential threat to their country and deemed a full-scale invasion to be likely. Wolves provided military support to Ukraine. Wolves included Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

Six in depth case studies of NATO Headquarters (HQ), France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States subsequently trace the perceptions and policies of these actors in greater detail.

NATO Headquarters

From the onset of the crisis, NATO proceeded cautiously. NATO HQ served merely as a forum to coordinate policies while allied governments provided support to Ukraine bilaterally. NATO officials repeatedly reaffirmed the primacy of Article 5 but took care to delineate the limits of NATO's collective defence obligations with reference to Ukraine's non-membership. NATO's manoeuvring space, including its ability to put crisis preparations in motion, was limited by institutional decision-making procedures that require the political consent of all allies. Unanimous consent was lacking because of varying threat perceptions amongst allies, even if permanent NATO HQ staff were alert to the severity of the threat. As a result, NATO's response centred on immediate deterrence and defence against a Russian attack on allied territory, while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia. After Russia had launched its full-scale invasion, NATO military HQ activated response plans including enhanced air policing and troop deployments along its eastern flank, adhering strictly to the territorial defence and deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic area.

France

In the lead-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the French government unfailingly sought to solve the crisis through diplomatic channels right up to the very last-minute. The position of the French government was guided by assumptions about Russian objectives, commitment to ongoing negotiations between Russia and Ukraine within the Normandy Format (with French and Germany as mediators), and a widely prevailing belief that large-scale war was irrational and therefore unlikely. Russian actions were seen as part of a hybrid campaign and coercive diplomacy with limited objectives, characteristic for Russia's normal *modus operandi*. Because providing military support to Ukraine was seen as potentially fuelling the fire – thereby risking giving Russia a pretext for escalation – the French government restricted itself to threatening with strong economic sanctions alongside emphasis on diplomacy. Similar to officials in other countries, French policymakers underestimated Ukrainian resilience and overestimated Russia's conventional military capabilities. Through diplomacy, French President Macron sought to avert war until the very last moment, but failed to change Vladimir Putin's course. Ultimately, reluctance to realistically engage with the possibility of a full-scale invasion stood in the way of a more forceful response and limited the French government's preparedness for the return of war to the European continent.

Germany

The German government's approach to the crisis was rooted in its long-standing policy of *Wandel durch Handel, Ostpolitik* and the country's overall pacifist culture. There was a widespread belief that deep economic interdependence between the two countries would restrain Russia's behaviour. German officials were sceptical of American and British intelligence and doubted Putin's willingness to launch a full-scale invasion until the very last moment. Russia's troop buildup was consistently interpreted to constitute coercive signalling rather than actual preparation for a full-scale invasion. At the same time, Ukraine was not provided with any military support, because this was considered to be incompatible with Germany's post-war identity and its relationship with Russia. Similar to the French government, the German government sought to resolve the crisis through negotiations restricting itself to threatening with economic sanctions. Overall, the possibility of large-scale war was inconceivable in the worldview of many officials, as they deeply believed Putin would rely on their concept of rationality. This contributed to strategic inertia on the side of the German government and prevented more proactive policy responses. The Russian invasion finally forced a fundamental shift in German defence and security policies with Chancellor Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech marking a break from the past.

The Netherlands

Similar to their French and German counterparts, many Dutch officials downplayed the likelihood of large-scale war, interpreting Russia's actions as routine provocations. Relations with Russia had already been strained due to Russia's downing of MH17 in 2014, in which 196 Dutch citizens died, alongside a series of incidents involving espionage, interference, and diplomatic tensions. Despite Russia's aggressive military and political posturing in the runup to the war, the Dutch government relied on threatening with economic sanctions within the diplomatic approach also adopted by its continental European allies. Putin's rhetoric was largely dismissed as posturing, intended for domestic consumption rather than as a pretext for a full-scale invasion. Both internal government and public discussions very much reflected

a peacetime mindset. Officials had a difficult time envisaging the possibility of the return of large-scale war to the European continent, which prevented the adoption of more robust responses. Very limited military support was announced only days before the invasion. The shock of the invasion had a profound impact on the government's outlook on the nature of the international security environment. It resulted in the reprioritisation of Dutch defence and security combined with strong financial and military support for Ukraine.

The United Kingdom

The UK government was clear-eyed about the scope of Russia's revisionist streak from early on in the crisis, informed by the legacy of the Cold War, a series of Russian attacks on UK territory from 2006 onwards, and a strong intelligence position. In 2021, the UK government had already identified Russia as "the most acute" threat to the Euro-Atlantic region. In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, it had been providing military support by training Ukrainian forces since 2015, which it complemented with the provision of military equipment and intelligence-sharing as the crisis unfolded. Although late in the crisis some of the UK Prime Minister's closest advisors did not consider full-scale war to be likely, Military planning from very early on considered worst-case scenarios including large-scale war. This enabled quicker and more steadfast responses and prompted the UK government, working closely with its US partner, to declassify and share intelligence about Russia's war preparations with NATO allies through what came to be dubbed 'Intelligence Diplomacy'. Even if the UK government doubted Ukraine's ability to withstand a Russian assault, it still sought to strengthen its ability to do so. The UK's assessment of the situation was met with scepticism from European allies, but as the crisis reached its boiling point, allies one by one came around to accept the undeniable.

The United States

The US government's approach was shaped by a combination of vectors, at times pulling in opposing directions, including a commitment to freedom and the sovereignty of Ukraine, a historical cautiousness in dealing with a nuclear peer competitor, and a sense that the US should lead the alliance and the free world. Initially, it viewed Russia's buildup as part of a campaign of limited coercive diplomacy, but that changed once US intelligence clearly indicated plans for an invasion. The intelligence, in combination with a Cold War history of strategic rivalry and deep mistrust between the leaders of the two countries, guided the US government's course. It had already provided military support to Ukraine prior to April 2021, which increased as the crisis unfolded. At the same time, the US government was careful not to provoke Russia: at critical moments, it publicly ruled out direct military responses out of fear of sparking a larger war which would bring the US into direct conflict with Russia. Instead, its principal approach to dissuade Russia from launching a full-scale invasion centred on intelligence exposures, diplomatic warnings and economic sanctions. The US government assembled a coalition of countries willing to impose punishment should Russia decide to invade. Through active 'Intelligence Diplomacy' it also signalled to Russia that its actions were closely monitored. Internally, the US established an interagency unit – the Tiger Team – which was tasked with drawing up detailed response packages, only to be used in a post-invasion scenario. Scepticism amongst allies about Russia's intentions hampered early coordination efforts, but US and UK 'Intelligence Diplomacy' created the foundation for collective action between NATO allies. The US government sought to balance its attempts at dissuasion with various diplomatic off-ramps, which ultimately failed to prevent Russia from launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

In the lead-up to the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, psychological and cognitive biases played a critical role in shaping Western decision-makers' threat perceptions and subsequent responses to Russia. Policymakers across Europe and the US struggled to interpret Moscow's intentions and calibrate their responses accordingly. While the US and the UK governments were certainly clear-eyed about the possibility of a full-scale invasion, other governments, including those of France, Germany, and the Netherlands, were reluctant to recognise the severity of the threat. These different perceptions were shaped not only by their respective intelligence positions, relations with Russia, and strategic priorities, but also by underlying biases that influenced perceptions and decisions at critical moments throughout the crisis. As a result, many policymakers discarded the likelihood of a large-scale conventional war, underestimated Ukraine's ability to resist, and were hesitant to take actions that in their view might provoke Russia and escalate the crisis. It was more than just a failure of analytics, it was a failure of imagination, caused by psychological and cognitive biases that were widespread amongst many Western policymakers. On the basis of the evidence presented in this study, it is no exaggeration to say that policymakers were blinded by bias. This is reflective, it must be added, of a wider societal context in which national populations had a very hard time envisaging the gruesome reality of war.

Drawing on seminal and contemporary works exploring the role of biases in decision-making, threat perception and credibility in international security, and the 44 interviews with high-level officials, our study identified the following seven psychological and cognitive biases to be particularly salient amongst Western policymakers:

1. **Availability Heuristic**
   Western societies, especially in Western Europe, had not experienced large-scale war for many decades. Interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were seen as distant and wars of choice. The Russian military buildup along Ukraine's borders was dismissed as mere posturing and part of a campaign of Russian intimidation, with which policymakers had plenty of experience over the past few years, not as preparation for large scale war. Policymakers, unfamiliar with the phenomenon of war, found it difficult to envisage the return of actual large-scale war on the European continent. The availability heuristic led key officials in governments — France, Germany, and the Netherlands in particular — to misinterpret Russia's intentions.

2. **Cognitive Dissonance**
   Similarly, the possibility of large-scale war stood in clear contradiction to prevailing beliefs in the pacifying effects of economic interdependence and the merits of diplomatic engagement. Recognition of the risk of a full-scale invasion also implied that policymakers would have to reject core assumptions informing their respective world views. Policymakers therefore either reinterpreted or dismissed warnings in response to the unpleasant emotion of cognitive dissonance. This not only resulted in different interpretations of intelligence amongst different NATO allies but also hindered a more robust collective response prior to the invasion.

3. **Mirror Imaging**
   Policymakers presumed that Russia's leadership would rely on Western concepts of rationality, which prioritised economic interests and peaceful co-existence over territorial conquest and war. As a result, they misjudged Putin's intentions, underestimated his risk tolerance, and misunderstood his cost calculus. As a result, they dismissed Putin's repeated assertions of Russia's interests as mere historical narratives that were symbolic rather than strategic in nature. Mirror imaging, especially prevalent in France, Germany, and

the Netherlands, and to some extent the US, led policymakers to believe that sanctions would suffice in dissuading Russia from invading while inhibiting more clear-eyed recognition of the threat posed by Russia.

4. **Poliheuristic Bias**
   Prior to the invasion, low public support for military engagement is likely to have affected political decision-making in different NATO countries. Political leaders avoided high-cost options, including providing Ukraine with military support, because they were seen as politically unpalatable. It may also have contributed to underappreciation of the threat of a full-scale invasion. This bias limited the range of strategic choices, including in the United States and the Netherlands, given the domestic political constraints experienced by decision-makers. In Germany and France, economic interdependence with Russia similarly constrained policy responses out of concern for the costs associated with escalation.

5. **Representativeness Heuristic**
   With respect to the nature of Russia's aggression, policymakers' perceptions were, perhaps paradoxically so, shaped by Russia's behaviour in recent conflicts including Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Eastern Ukraine (2014-2022). Across different NATO allies, it informed assumptions of a limited Russian operation. As a result, policymakers failed to interpret the 2021–22 military buildup as a signal of large-scale war. Widely prevailing assumptions of Russian military superiority, based on Russia's successes in at least some of these operations, further negatively affected the willingness to provide Ukraine with strong military support, because it was expected that Ukraine would be swiftly defeated.

6. **Groupthink**
   Dominant narratives about the intents and purposes of Russia's leadership prevented consideration of more extreme scenarios. Groupthink led to alternative outcomes not being seriously assessed or fed into the decision-making chain. In France and Germany, and to a lesser extent the Netherlands, such dominant narratives guided internal discussions and shaped assessments of likely outcomes of the crisis. It also limited the range of policy options that were considered. Only in the UK was groupthink more actively mitigated.

7. **Self-Deterrence**
   Fear of provoking escalation consistently restrained more robust Western responses. Policymakers were concerned that military support could further provoke a Russian intervention as it could be used as a pretext by the Russian government. The German, French, Dutch, and even the US governments, in varying degrees, initially opposed stronger military support to Ukraine, considering it as an escalation risk. Self-deterrence is therefore likely to have reduced the level of support offered to Ukraine prior to the invasion.

Psychological and cognitive biases thus had a huge effect on Western threat perceptions and responses ahead of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Preventing future crises such as the onset of war in Ukraine may be impossible. But recognising and learning from past mistakes is not. When the next crisis will inevitably emerge – and in today's world, they present themselves in quick succession – it is important to recognise and mitigate the biases that influence the perceptions and shape the decisions that are intended to keep us safe.

The main body of this study offers a detailed list of twenty recommendations for the individual biases. Overall, the study yields the following more general recommendations:

1. **Recognise and acknowledge biases through training**
   Greater awareness of the existence of biases, and their effects, facilitates efforts to overcome them. The effects of biases must be recognised through bias awareness and bias reduction trainings and simulations and exercises. Groups around policymakers can also be trained to respond and mitigate biases by, for example, adjusting intelligence products to also highlight atypical and critical perspectives and policy alternatives.

2. **Develop operational frameworks to understand the adversary**
   Adversary operational frameworks need to be developed to gain a better understanding of the adversary's perspective and *modus operandi* from their own side, including through the input of more diverse, multidisciplinary teams and through cross-national dialogue with allies.

3. **Foster critical thinking and consider conflicting information**
   Information cycles surrounding key decision-makers should include atypical information and conflicting worldviews. Structured and routinised challenges to dominant institutional narratives can complement efforts to stimulate critical thought, for example through red teaming, devil's advocate groups and reducing top-down hierarchical pressures.

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We would like to express our gratitude to all interviewees who graciously gave their time, offered their valuable observations, and reflected on their experiences during one of the most challenging periods of international statecraft in recent history. This study has only been possible because of the willingness of policymakers to participate in in depth conversations and share their insights. They deserve gratitude and praise for their willingness to do so.

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A final word of thanks to the sponsors of the study at the Dutch Ministry of Defence who trusted us to conduct this study on a sensitive topic without interfering either in the process or the content. Having been born and having lived in consolidated democracies such as the Netherlands, we do not often sufficiently appreciate the freedom of speech. But in times such as these, with the deconsolidation of mature democracies unfolding before our eyes, we are reminded to cherish this hard begotten right, including the latitude to publish research that critically reviews the performance of those that ultimately fund this study. Only through revisiting the past can we learn from our mistakes. Our thanks go out to them.

1. Introduction

In the period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine of February 2022, the possibility of a conventional war on the European continent encountered widespread disbelief in the capitals of many North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies, despite the fact that Russia had repeatedly signalled both its refusal to recognise Ukraine as a sovereign state and its willingness to use force to assert this view. In Western capitals, a state of incredulity about Russia's stated intents and purposes coexisted alongside deep concerns about taking actions that might provoke Russia. Overall, this led to a partial and belated recognition of the seriousness of the threat posed by Russia, inhibited more forceful responses, and fuelled reluctance to provide Ukraine with the support necessary to deter a Russian invasion.

In contrast to the failure to take the threat posed by Russia seriously was the reversal after the full-scale invasion. The impact of the invasion on the perceptions of Western policymakers including elected political leaders, their advisors, intelligence analysts, as well as those working at the departments of foreign affairs, defence and elsewhere, was enormous.[1] Not just the public at large but also the political establishment *rediscovered* war. Defence was no longer a dirty word. In many European countries, military budgets have doubled or in some cases even tripled since. The wheels of large bureaucracies started turning, if slowly, to rebuild often dilapidated capabilities while defence industries were restarted, sometimes from scratch. Meanwhile, NATO members offered massive support packages to Ukraine with billions and billions of humanitarian and financial aid, the provision of ever stronger military capabilities to its armed forces, and the imposition of cumulatively stronger sanction packages on Russia.

Taken together, this constituted a dramatic turnaround in European perceptions of Russia and the nature of its security environment. It sparked, without exaggeration, a paradigm shift as the world appeared dramatically different after the invasion compared to how it did before. This turnaround begs the question as to why the possibility of war and the clear and present danger posed by Russia was downplayed in the perceptions of policymakers and the public at large. This study delves deeper into this question. It examines how Western policymakers perceived the threat posed by Russia and the demands it presented, and analyses the psychological and cognitive biases that affected their perceptions and subsequently informed Western responses.

It bears noting that in hindsight, historical events often assume a sense of inevitability. It seems as if some unstoppable force prompted the occurrence of a crisis or the outbreak of a war. Accounts of such historical events are often written up in teleological fashion to explain why there was a breakdown in relations, conveniently overlooking the fact that along many junctures, the course of history could have taken a different turn. A study of Western perceptions runs the risk of hindsight bias. After all, at any moment prior to the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Vladmir Putin could have decided against embarking on a full-scale invasion

[1] In this study, policymakers is a broader term employed to refer to decision-makers (elected officials), government officials (those holding posts at various levels) and policy advisors and intelligence analysts (those in government providing expertise and recommendations). All three groups are involved in the decision-making process and influence public and foreign policy.

of Ukraine.[2] When precisely Putin decided to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine will be for future historians to settle–perhaps during a future period of *détente* once the archives in Moscow open, assuming there is a paper trail of the policy process.[3] Yet, as we will demonstrate in this study, according to all salient explanations of threat credibility in the academic literature, the threats posed by Russia could have been taken seriously. But it was not, or not sufficiently, by many policymakers in NATO countries. This study will seek to formulate an answer as to why they did not.

The course of events as such is not disputed. The invasion was preceded by a long prelude which by now has been well documented and only merits brief mention here.[4] Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and interfered militarily in Eastern Ukraine resulting in tens of thousands of deaths. In April 2021, Russia engaged in a military buildup and a partial drawdown of a massive number of forces along Ukraine's borders. In July 2021, Vladimir Putin published an essay in which he proclaimed the unity of Russia and Ukraine.[5] From early autumn onwards, Russian forces started reassembling in massive numbers, following which Russia presented a *démarche* to the United States (US) and NATO demanding that the West recognise Russia's spheres of influence, not just over Ukraine but also over former Warsaw Pact states, which would require NATO's withdrawal to pre-1997 positions.[6] NATO and its members declined to enter negotiations about Russia's demands which, according to senior officials, were deemed to be too "*preposterous*" to consider.[7] After Russia continued to make preparations for war, and last-minute diplomatic attempts to avert further escalation failed, Russia embarked on its ill-fated attack that after three years has resulted in hundreds of thousands of fatalities and casualties, the wholesale destruction of Ukrainian cities, and the risk of escalation of the war into a direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO.

The crisis, as it unfolded, featured striking similarities with many twentieth century interstate crises: a legacy of contested territory; a revisionist state embarking on a clearly aggressive campaign; the preparation of armed forces; the deployment of coercive threats– both implicit and explicit; the internationalisation of the crisis; the formal presentation of political demands; pledges of international support, albeit very hesitant, for the affected state; shuttle diplomacy; the threat of sanctions for the aggressor; and, finally, escalation and the outbreak of war.[8]

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2 Philosophers (of science), historians, and political scientists have debated issues related to contingency and necessity for centuries. In the political science genre, it has evolved around the notion of counterfactuals. For an introduction, see: Richard Ned Lebow, 'Counterfactuals and Foreign Policy Analysis', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.402; BLOM Tannelie et al., 'Modalities and Counterfactuals in History and the Social Sciences: Some Preliminary Reflections', *Philosophica* 44 (1989), https://www.philosophica.ugent.be/article/id/82441/download/pdf/; James D. Fearon, 'Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science', *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 169–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/2010470; Edward Carr, *What Is History?* (Vintage; 1st edition, 1967).

3 Even without such formal documentation, historians will have to sieve through heaps of data, including interviews, memoirs, and satellite imagery before a thorough reconstruction can be accomplished.

4 Lawrence Freedman, 'From Hybrid Conflict to All-Out War: Russia Fights Ukraine', in *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, Eerste editie (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

5 Vladimir Putin, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', *President of Russia*, 12 July 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

6 James Siebens, 'Is Russia's Invasion a Case of Coercive Diplomacy Gone Wrong?', War on the Rocks, 31 March 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/is-russias-invasion-a-case-of-coercive-diplomacy-gone-wrong/.

7 Interview 4

8 Glenn Herald Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton University Press, 1977), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x0wmf; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); *A Study of Crisis* (n.d.), accessed 24 March 2025, https://press.umich.edu/Books/A/A-Study-of-Crisis3; Todd S. Sechser, 'Militarized Compellent Threats, 1918–2001', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no. 4 (2011): 377–401; Tim Sweijs, *Ultimata in Coercive Diplomacy Dataset 1920-2020*, Version 1.0 (2023), https://www.coercivediplomacy.com/data-viewer/.

At the same time, many questions remain unresolved. Were Russia's policies in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of February 2022 part of a planned-out campaign of coercive diplomacy against the US, the European Union (EU) and NATO, involving 'the threat or the actual use of limited force...which increases the risk of escalation to war...in order to pressure an opposing party....to comply with a set of demands?'[9] Or were they the outcome of a disjointed and fragmented policy process in Russia in which Vladimir Putin only let a select few know about his plans, leaving others in the dark about his intention to go to war?[10] Was the standoff in the winter of 2021-22 a 'brinkmanship crisis', one that resulted from deliberate challenges by Russia to 'an important commitment of another state in the hope of compelling its adversary to back away from his commitment'? Or was it instead a 'justification of hostility' crisis, which was created by the Kremlin 'not to force an accommodation but to provide a casus belli for [a] war' it had already decided upon?[11] And if it was not the intent of the Kremlin to go to war, did it conceive of the crisis as a typical bully game, in which it would be able to enforce at least part of the demands contained in its dictate (i.e. the subjugation of Ukraine), if they were rejected by the West, because Putin expected that some Ukrainians would welcome the Russian invasion and Ukraine would be swiftly defeated while the West would stand idly by?[12] These important questions will remain unresolved for now. But in line with the old saying 'know thy enemy, know thyself', it is possible to investigate Western perceptions of Russia in the run-up to the war in order to get a better understanding of why policymaking communities perceived Russia the way they did, and which biases may have affected their judgment. Surprisingly, there has been only limited attention to this topic.

After the outbreak of war, most of the attention in Western strategic communities focused on the war itself and the lessons that can be identified and learned from it.[13] First, dominant discussions pertained to the return of large-scale conventional war, Russia's seeming inability to wage it, the Potemkin state of its armed forces, the lack of Mission Command, the flawed implementation of multi-domain warfare, and the ways in which information flows in authoritarian regimes and the impact it has on the performance of 'Dictator's Armies'.[14] There was furthermore surprise and admiration for Ukraine's ability to defend itself, including the role of societal cohesion and military preparedness, and questions about whether and how to support the Ukrainian war effort. In addition, discussions touched upon the non-military side of things, including the role of denial and the extent to which economic sanctions could help undermine Russia's warfighting effort; the efficacy of nuclear threats on deterring external actors from intervening and the arguably much more limited efficacy of nuclear threats on compelling opponents to give in. Strategic conversations then turned to warfare with attention to what happens if swift wars fail, as attrition warfare was rediscovered, including the willingness to spill blood, to destroy vital infrastructure and to break the will of populations to fight. This then naturally turned to the prerequisites for waging war including large-scale industrial

9 Alexander L. George and William E. Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Second Edition* (Westview Press Inc, 1994), http://archive.org/details/limitsofcoercive0000geor; Peter Viggo Jakobsen, '20. Coercive Diplomacy: Countering War-Threatening Crises and Armed Conflicts', in *Contemporary Security Studies* (Oxford University Press, n.d.), accessed 24 March 2025, https://www.oxfordpoliticstrove.com/display/10.1093/hepl/9780198862192.001.0001/hepl-9780198862192-chapter-20.

10 As was suggested by different interviewees we spoke to in the context of our study. For takes on this, see, amongst others, interview 36-40.

11 Lebow, *Between Peace and War, 25*.

12 Snyder and Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations*, 122; Tim Sweijs, *The Use and Utility of Ultimata in Coercive Diplomacy*, 2023rd edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 8. The Dictate; Sjoerd de Jong, 'Stekelvarkens, kippen en giftige garnalen: wat is Poetins strategie?', *NRC*, 28 January 2022, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/01/28/stekelvarkens-kippen-en-giftige-garnalen-wat-is-poetins-strategie-a4083606.

13 Tim Sweijs and Jeffrey H. Michaels, eds, *Beyond Ukraine: Debating the Future of War* (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2024).

14 Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cornell University Press, 2015), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt20d89pv.

mobilisation and resourcing the Ukrainian war effort, which included the whole munitions debate. There was a slow shift away from technology and system-focused discussions (e.g., *Bayraktar TB2* drones, Patriots and HIMARS), and whether or not they were auguring a transformation in the character of war, to the fundamentals of war, how long it will last, and what it takes to end this war, in which coercion and influencing Russia's strategic calculus returned to the fore. Donald Trump's return to office earlier this year further reinforced this development with discussions centring on what type of war settlement would establish lasting peace, bringing war back to politics, and the political objectives that the use of force serves.

Comparatively less attention has been paid to the events that preceded the war and led up to its outbreak. There have been numerous treatments of the historical context of the war, including the history of Russia-Ukraine relations, Russia's intervention in Ukraine, and the relationship between Russia, the EU and NATO.[15] Another angle homes in on Russia's leadership personified in its President Vladimir Putin and the role he played in the war.[16] And then there is a third strand, most closely related to this study, that reflects on the assessments of the Western strategic community, including intelligence organisations and those working in academia and the think tank world. Studies in this strand focus on why the assessments of the intelligence agencies of major military powers did not get it right, or why the analyses of many prominent experts – who were widely cited in the Western popular and political debate– turned out to be off the mark.[17] These studies of "analytic failure" are part of a relevant process of reflection and soul searching.[18] A report by Eliot Cohen and Philips O'Brien published by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, found that:

> "*The expert community grossly overestimated Russian military capabilities, dismissed the chances of Ukraine resisting effectively, and presented the likely outcome of the war as quick and decisive. [...] Pessimism about Ukraine's chances restricted military support before February 24, 2022.*"[19]

According to the authors, dominant beliefs about Russian superiority sustained by the analytic community negatively influenced the cost-benefit calculation made by decision-makers in the buildup to the invasion. Extensive military aid was not provided, because it was believed to be to no avail. Cohen & O'Brien do not, however, explain why decision-makers in many NATO member states held a low threat perception, despite substantial intelligence supporting a credible likelihood of a Russian invasion. Additionally, while misperception of

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15 James Goldgeier and Joshua R. I. Shifrinson, eds, *Evaluating NATO Enlargement: From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

16 Muhammad Derfish Ilyas, 'Responsible Leadership in Crisis Management: Lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis and Russia-Ukraine War', *Open Journal of Business and Management* 11, no. 3 (2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2023.113054.

17 Eva Michaels, 'Caught off Guard? Evaluating How External Experts in Germany Warned about Russia's War on Ukraine', *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 420–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2330133; Bettina Renz, 'Was the Russian Invasion of Ukraine a Failure of Western Deterrence?', *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 53, no. 4 (2023): 5–17; Jonas J. Driedger and Mikhail Polianskii, 'Utility-Based Predictions of Military Escalation: Why Experts Forecasted Russia Would Not Invade Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 544–60; Michael Jonsson, 'Swedish Intelligence, Russia and the War in Ukraine: Anticipations, Course, and Future Implications', *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 443–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2325248; Kristian Gustafson et al., 'Intelligence Warning in the Ukraine War, Autumn 2021 – Summer 2022', *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 400–419, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2322214; Huw Dylan and Thomas J. Maguire, 'Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War', *Survival* 64, no. 4 (2022): 33–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2103257.

18 Eliot A. Cohen and Phillips O'Brien, *The Russia-Ukraine War: A Study in Analytic Failure* (CSIS, 2024), https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-ukraine-war-study-analytic-failure.

19 Cohen and O'Brien, *The Russia-Ukraine War*, 13.

Russian and Ukrainian capabilities is part of the answer, it does not necessarily account for why policymakers accepted and followed prevailing expert assessments.

This study focuses on the role played by policymakers' threat perception in the pre-invasion phase of the war in Ukraine. It does so because analytic failures take place in a wider societal context in which the perceptions of people, whether they are intelligence analysts, experts, or political leaders and their policy advisors, are shaped by psychological biases that affect the ways in which they perceive the world they live in. Rather than only constituting a failure of analytics, it was a failure of the imagination of people who were, per the title of this study, blinded by bias.

1.1. Structure of this Study

This study therefore traces the perceptions of Russia on the part of Western leaders and their advisors in the run-up to the full-scale invasion of February 2022. It argues that according to the principal explanations of threat credibility in the academic literature, Western policymakers could have been expected to assess the Russian threat as credible based on an assessment of Russia's intentions, capabilities and activities and the fact that a potential full-scale invasion, in intelligence terms was probable (Chapter 2). It then goes on to demonstrate that the majority of them did not, however. It surveys and classifies NATO members based on their threat perception, assessment of the probability of an invasion, and support to Ukraine prior to the invasion (Chapter 3). The survey is followed by in depth case studies of NATO Headquarters (HQ), France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States based on extensive review of open-sources complemented with 44 interviews with officials working at the highest levels of NATO HQ and governments (Chapters 4-9). In accounting for their perceptions, the study shows how these were affected by biases based on a qualitative comparative analysis of the interviews and additional sources (Chapter 10). Finally, the conclusion (Chapter 11) briefly synthesises the main insights derived from this study and outlines recommendations to countervail these biases.

1.2. Methodology

This study employs a multi-method approach consisting of analysis of official documents and media reports of the events leading up to and during the crisis, semi-structured interviews with officials closely involved in the policy processes, and an assessment of the relevant academic literature related to coercive diplomacy, political psychology and crisis decision-making.

The analysis of the threat posed by Russia in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine of February 2022 provided in Chapter 2 is based on desk research of primary and secondary sources informing Russian capabilities, stated interests and past behaviour of military resolve. Academic literature on threat credibility in international relations provides the theoretical foundation for the analysis.

The overview of threat perceptions of NATO member states offered in Chapter 3 is based on an open-source analysis of public statements by government officials and documents articulating the leadership's assessment of the likelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine

(full-scale, partial or no invasion), the threat posed by Russia to their own country (existential or non-existential), and the type of support offered to Ukraine before the invasion (from no support to military support).[20] Around 50% of the data underlying the coding of threat perceptions originates from non-English sources and has been translated using Google Translate if it was outside the Dutch, English, French and German language domains. On that basis, NATO allies were categorised in four groups: Doves, Deer, Buzzards, and Wolves. Doves are countries that did not perceive Russia as an existential threat and evaluated the possibility of a full-scale invasion as unlikely. Doves did not offer any military support prior to the invasion. Deer perceived Russia as an existential threat and considered a full-scale invasion likely, but chose not to support Ukraine militarily. Buzzards did not consider Russia an existential threat, even though they perceived the possibility of a full-scale invasion likely, and provided military support to Ukraine. Finally, Wolves saw Russia as an existential threat and believed in a full-scale invasion, which led them to provide military support to Ukraine. Full definitions and coding schemes are provided in Annex 1.

The case study narratives of NATO HQ, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States offered in Chapters 4-9 are based on the consultation of primary and secondary sources complemented with 44 semi-structured interviews with officials from these countries and NATO HQ. These officials worked at the offices of presidents, prime ministers or the secretary-general, at ministries of defence and foreign affairs, as well as in embassies in Russia and Ukraine. They were either directly involved in the policymaking processes or close witness to it in the years and months leading up to the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. These countries were chosen for further analysis for various reasons, including their role in the NATO alliance, differences in strategic outlook, variation in threat perception, accessibility to policymakers, and available resources (time and budget). No claim to representativeness of this limited sample of countries is made and additional research is called for to examine dynamics in other NATO member states. Interviews were conducted between March 2024 and January 2025. Interviewees were provided with a consent form in which they agreed to participate in the interviews and set the conditions for the ways in which their contribution could be cited. Although some of the interviewees opted to go on the record with full attribution, the vast majority preferred being referenced only by their nationality and sometimes their departmental affiliation while remaining anonymous. We have decided to anonymise all interviewees and refer to them only by affiliation, nationality, and in the footnotes with numbers. Only a handful of the interviewees agreed to be interviewed on background only, in which case they have not been cited in the text. These oral histories derived from the interviews were complemented with extensive desk research, including academic and media articles discussing various aspects of the crisis, books, biographies, as well as public statements by political leaders and official government documents in their original language sources Dutch, French, German, and English. Quotes extracted from the interviews have been italicised.

To arrive at a shortlist of relevant psychological biases offered in Chapter 10, the team went through several iterations. First, an academic literature review on coercive diplomacy, crisis decision-making and political psychology resulted in a shortlist of fourteen biases. This literature was selected based on a review of seminal works in the literature cited in the footnotes, reference tracking, complemented with AI-assisted queries using the software programme Undermind.ai. [21] The team also experimented with ChatGPT 4o to assess the prevalence

[20] The analysis is based on public statements and government documents reflecting political leadership opinion between 1st January and 17th February 2022. No conclusive data on perceived likelihood was found for Croatia, Denmark and Iceland. Albania, Luxembourg, Montenegro and North Macedonia were excluded from the analysis.

[21] Sweijs, *Ultimata in Coercive Diplomacy Dataset 1920-2020*.

of these biases in the case narratives of 87 interstate crises that are part of the *Ultimata in Coercive Diplomacy Dataset 1920-2020,* a dataset previously developed by the first author of this study. ChatGPT 4o was asked to identify the shortlisted biases in the crises, explain how they played a role in particular crises, suggest any other biases relevant in crisis decision-making, and describe their more general application in shaping perceptions of decision-makers.[22] The resulting shortlist of psychological and cognitive biases was applied to the interview transcripts of the 44 interviews with officials. The interview transcripts were subjected to a qualitative content analysis identifying the psychological and cognitive biases that mediated Western threat perception leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulting in a final list of seven biases that stood out as being particularly important. The conclusion and recommendations offered in Chapter 11 have been informed by a review of the political psychology and leadership management literature and are based on the expert judgment of the research team. Finally, the team prompted ChatGPT 4o to summarise key findings from the case study chapters which were used as input in the preparation of the Executive Summary.

[22] For an overview of the brainstorm, the results, and the obvious limitations, please see here, https://chatgpt.com/share/67bd8fe9-34a0-8003-a6ec-a907131f951b. For our manual on how to responsibly use generative AI applications, see Tim Sweijs, Jesse Kommandeur, Abe de Ruijter Augmentation, Not Substitution: HCSS Manual for the Responsible Use of Generative AI, HCSS: October 2024, at https://hcss.nl/report/augmentation-not-substitution-hcss-manual-for-the-responsible-use-of-generative-ai/

2. Conditions for Threat Credibility: Russia in Western Eyes

Russia had been at war with Ukraine since its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and through its continued military presence in eastern Ukraine. From April 2021 onwards, Russia stationed large numbers of military forces along the Russian-Ukrainian border and started to conduct military exercises. This sparked an immediate global crisis as it was the largest presence of troops massed at Ukraine's borders since the 2014 annexation of Crimea.[23] Although Russia ostensibly withdrew its forces, it left much of the military infrastructure as well as a force presence of more than 80,000 troops in place, leaving tensions unresolved. The buildup prompted a great power summit between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in Geneva on 16 June 2021. Both leaders emerged with a "Joint Statement on Strategic Stability" and expressed a commitment to improving relations.[24] However, only weeks later, on 29 June, tensions flared when Russia was accused of aggressive actions against a Dutch frigate in the Black Sea, underscoring the region's volatility.[25]

By the summer, tensions continued to mount, particularly after Putin published his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which in hindsight offered a justification for aggression.[26] The situation worsened in September with Zapad 2021, the largest Russian-Belarusian joint military exercise since 1981, further stoking fears of a looming conflict.[27] On 10 September, the EU as well as the UK prolonged the sanctions they had imposed in 2014 on Russian individuals and businesses with close ties to the Kremlin who were thought to be involved in undermining Ukrainian territorial sovereignty.[28] With tensions once again on the rise, NATO expelled eight Russian officials from its headquarters for espionage on 6 October.[29] Prompting Moscow to retaliate by shutting down its NATO mission and closing

23 Mykola Bielieskov, *The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210921_Bielieskov_War_Scene.pdf?VersionId=1LcoLhk8Qe3cswhqsQPNN6HJg0XvrdNa.

24 The White House, 'U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability', The White House, 16 June 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/.

25 'Russia Accused of "Aggressive Actions" against Dutch Frigate in Black Sea Confrontation', *NL Times*, 29 June 2021, https://nltimes.nl/2021/06/29/russia-accused-aggressive-actions-dutch-frigate-black-sea-confrontation.

26 Putin, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"', 2021.

27 Giangiuseppe Pili and Fabriozio Minniti, 'Understanding Russia's Great Games: From Zapad 2013 to Zapad 2021', RUSI, 30 October 2024, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/understanding-russias-great-games-zapad-2013-zapad-2021.

28 'Ukraine: EU Sanctions over Territorial Integrity Prolonged for a Further Six Months', Consilium, accessed 24 March 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/09/10/ukraine-eu-sanctions-over-territorial-integrity-prolonged-for-a-further-six-months/.

29 'Russia Suspends Its Mission at NATO, Shuts Alliance's Office - POLITICO', accessed 4 April 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/18/russia-suspends-mission-nato-shuts-office-516189.

NATO's office in Moscow on 18 October. By 13 November, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was sounding the alarm, warning that approximately 100,000 Russian troops had massed along the border.[30] Diplomatic efforts continued, but the signs of impending war became harder to ignore. On 7 December, Biden held a tense call with Putin, convinced that an invasion was imminent. A week later, on 15 December, Russia presented a draft treaty to the US and NATO, demanding concessions that were deemed to be completely unrealistic.[31] As the crisis escalated, US intelligence reported in early January 2022 that Russia was preparing a false flag operation to justify a broader conflict. This was made public on 14 January, reinforcing fears of an imminent attack. After a series of NATO meetings, the US and the alliance formally rejected Russia's demands on 26 January. Days later, on 29 January, US intelligence revealed that Russian forces had even stockpiled blood supplies near the front lines.[32] This indicated, to some observers at least, an ominous sign that an invasion was near. Later in February, tensions reached a boiling point. What had once been a geopolitical standoff erupted into large-scale war, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Even if Russia's invasion may not have been preordained, it is puzzling that this was met with disbelief, because there was plenty of reason to conclude that Russia in effect constituted a clear and present danger. In fact, the Russian threat to Ukraine satisfied all conditions to be considered credible according to three salient explanations of threat credibility in the academic literature succinctly summarised with (1) interests, (2) capabilities, and (3) reputation based on past behaviour.[33] In short, Russia had repeatedly stated its interests, had developed the military capabilities which it had put in place, and had clearly shown its proclivity to use military force, not just in other theatres but also against Ukraine (see Table 1). Credibility, a well-established concept in the academic literature, does not imply inevitability, nor should it be conflated with the concept of probability or likelihood, terms that are employed in intelligence assessments. Even with these indicators flashing red, a range of scenarios, including a limited incursion as well as a full-scale invasion, remained possible.

By 13 November (...) approximately 100.000 Russian troops had massed along the border.

30 'Ukraine Says Russia Has Nearly 100,000 Troops near Its Border', Europe, *Reuters*, 13 November 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-says-russia-has-nearly-100000-troops-near-its-border-2021-11-13/.

31 William Alberque, 'Russia's New Draft Treaties: Like 2009, but Worse', IISS, 25 January 2021, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/01/russias-new-draft-treaties-like-2009-but-worse/.

32 Phil Stewart, 'EXCLUSIVE Russia Moves Blood Supplies near Ukraine, Adding to U.S. Concern, Officials Say', Europe, *Reuters*, 29 January 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-russia-moves-blood-supplies-near-ukraine-adding-us-concern-officials-2022-01-28/.

33 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press, 1966), 124, https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300253481.; Daryl Grayson Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2005), 142–43; Robert Jervis, Keren Yarhi-Milo, and Don Casler, 'Redefining the Debate Over Reputation and Credibility in International Security: Promises and Limits of New Scholarship', *World Politics* 73, no. 1 (2021): 175, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887120000246.

Table 1. Perceptions of credibility in international security and the Russian threat in the pre-invasion phase of the war in Ukraine

Perception of credibility	Description	Russian threat in the pre-invasion phase of the war in Ukraine
Interests	Credibility is strengthened when the aggressor clearly communicates strong motivation and interests at stake. If a state does not have an interest to follow through on a threat, credibility is weakened.	• Repeated public assertions that Ukraine constituted a core interest, including in Putin's 2021 July article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" illustrated the historical and cultural significance Russia attached to Ukraine. • Russia's December 2021 demands to the US and NATO clearly laid-out the national security interests attached to Ukraine.
Capabilities	For a threat to be deemed credible, recipients should be convinced that the aggressor is able to follow through on the threat posed. If military capabilities do not match implicit or explicit threats, credibility is weakened.	• Widespread belief that the Russian armed forces had transformed into a modern operating force. Exemplified by Syrian experience. • Intelligence showed significant and irregular buildup of Russian troops along the border with Ukraine, including indications of combat readiness.
Past behaviour	A reputation of resolve based on past behaviour, especially in similar situations, increases the credibility of threats posed by a state. If past behaviour is inconsistent with current threats, credibility is weakened.	• Russia's previous military aggression in Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas were preceded by Russia 1) perceiving a threat to its national security, 2) spreading narratives of human rights violations and 3) referring to Russian citizens in the region. • In the months leading up to February 2022, Russia showed similar behaviour in reference to Ukraine. Suggesting military action to be among potential lines of action.

2.1. Vital Interests

Interests motivate a state to actually follow through on a threat. Thus, the more interests are at stake for a potential aggressor, the more credible its threats will be.[34] Additionally, credibility will be higher if the costs of carrying out the threat are presumed to be lower than the interests at stake. In this regard, communication is key; if interests are not clearly communicated, they may not be perceived as such. These interests can be material in nature, such as access to natural resources and control of strategic areas, or immaterial, for example because of the cultural or religious significance that is attached to a territory.[35]

In the case of Ukraine, President Putin stated both material and immaterial interests in his 2021 summer article and subsequent December demands presented to the US and NATO in the lead-up to the invasion.[36] Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's political and societal elites have repeatedly stressed the geopolitical and historical significance of Ukraine to Russia.[37] Putin, too, has at numerous occasions referred to the unity between the Russian and Ukrainian people ever since he first took office in 2000. Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, this rhetoric started to include references to Russia's imperial history to legitimise Russia's annexation of the peninsula.[38] In July 2021 in his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians

34 Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence* (RAND Corporation, 2018), 8–11, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html.

35 Press, *Calculating Credibility*, 25.

36 Peter Dickinson, 'Putin's New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions', *Atlantic Council*, 15 July 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/; Andrew E. Kramer and Steven Erlanger, 'Russia Lays Out Demands for a Sweeping New Security Deal With NATO', *The New York Times*, 17 December 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/world/europe/russia-nato-security-deal.html.

37 Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun, 'Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalized Narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 491.

38 Niels Drost, *How Vladimir Putin Uses the History of the Russian Empire* (Clingendael, 2022), 2–3, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/CA_Tsar-struck.pdf.

and Ukrainians", Putin compiled these narratives claiming that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. [...] Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people."[39] Some observers portrayed the essay in hindsight as an ultimatum to the Ukrainian people, with the survival of the Ukrainian state dependent on their decision to align themselves with Russia.[40] Whether this in effect constituted a final warning or not, it is clear that Putin had clearly and publicly signalled the cultural and historical significance of a 'Russian Ukraine' at least since the annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine was not only relevant to Russia for cultural and historical reasons but also constituted a strategic interest. Russian strategic culture is ingrained with a sense of vulnerability to the West on the one hand and a feeling of entitlement to a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood on the other. As a result, Ukraine's increased cooperation with the West was perceived in Russia as a threat to its national security and its status as a great power. Inside Russia, these perceptions prompted increasingly extreme narratives legitimising the invasion of Ukraine.[41] Externally, Putin expressed these strategic interests in demands presented to the US and NATO in December 2021. The draft treaties included provisions prohibiting NATO membership for former Soviet states including Ukraine, reducing US and NATO troop and missile deployments to the 1997 status, and calling for the removal of American nuclear weapons from the continent.[42] While the US and NATO considered these demands totally unacceptable, they certainly clearly communicated the strategic interests that Russia attached to Ukraine.

2.2. **Military Capabilities**

To determine the credibility of a military threat, decision-makers evaluate a country's military capabilities. A threat is more likely to be credible in the perception of the recipient if the aggressor has the ability to follow through on it.[43] Capabilities include the quality and quantity of (major) weapon systems, the ability of a country to finance a war, and a society's willingness to suffer casualties. Depending on the threat posed, different aspects and branches of military power will be relevant.[44] In the buildup to the invasion of Ukraine, there was clearly the perception that Russia had embarked on a successful process of modernisation of its military forces among NATO allies, complemented with widely shared intelligence on the buildup of troops at the border.

Since the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, Russian armed forces had undergone significant organisational reforms and modernisation. After the 2008 war exposed major deficiencies in Russia's Soviet-era troops, Russian leadership devised the New Look modernisation programme that aimed to transform Russia's military from one dependent

39 Putin, 'Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"'.

40 Nataliya Bugayova et al., *Weakness Is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End* (Institute for the Study of War, 2023), 5, https://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Weakness%20is%20Lethal%20Why%20Putin%20Invaded%20Ukraine%20and%20How%20the%20War%20Must%20End%20PDF.pdf.

41 Götz and Staun, 'Why Russia Attacked Ukraine', 483.

42 Russian Federation, 'Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees', 15 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en; Russian Federation, 'Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of The Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

43 George and Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Second Edition*; Peter Viggo Jakobsen, *Western Use of Coercive Diplomacy After the Cold War: A Challenge for Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases* (Oxford University Press, 1998), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198293491.001.0001.

44 Press, *Calculating Credibility*, 24–25.

on mass-mobilisation to a smaller, more professional army.[45] Organisational reforms were understood to have transformed the Russian military into a rapidly deployable and trained force, capable of joint operations between the army and air force.[46] These organisational changes were accompanied by the modernisation of existing weaponry and equipment, and the development of new capabilities.[47] Despite delays, it was projected that by 2020 70% of Russia's ground forces' equipment had been modernised.[48] And while the introduction of next-generation stealth fighters, battle tanks and naval platforms lagged behind stated goals, Russia significantly advanced its rockets, cruise missiles and radars, enabling longer-range precision strikes.[49] Taken together, it was widely perceived in the buildup to the 2022 invasion that the Russian armed forces had transformed into a modern operating force capable of executing swift, regional campaigns.[50] Russia's military involvement in Syria largely reinforced these beliefs, providing Russian troops and military leaders with valuable combat experience and opportunities to test new weapon systems.[51] Thus, while the actual invasion may have exposed the Potemkin state of Russia's military, prior to the invasion the prevailing perceptions in the Western expert and policymaking community were that Russia possessed the military capabilities with which it could defeat Ukraine.[52]

Despite delays, it was projected that by 2020 70% of Russia's ground forces' equipment had been modernised.

In addition to possessing the theoretical capability to follow through on a threat, a heightened state of military readiness further contributes to threat credibility. First in April and later from September 2021 onwards, US intelligence sources observed an irregular buildup of Russian armed forces along the border with Ukraine.[53] After the September Zapad 2021 exercise in western Russia, military equipment, communication centres and personnel normally stationed elsewhere remained.[54] By October, an estimated 80.000 to 90.000 Russian soldiers were stationed close to the border with Ukraine, in addition to tens of thousands of troops in Crimea.[55] In January 2022, Ukrainian authorities alleged Russia to have deployed 127.000 soldiers, including 21.000 air and sea troops, and *Iskander* missiles in the vicinity of Ukraine.[56] Additionally, US officials claimed that these troops had been equipped with additional medical supplies and blood bags, indicating combat readiness, and further enhancing the credibility of a possible invasion.[57]

45 Roger N. McDermott, *Russia's Armed Forces: The Power of Illusion* (IFRI, 2009), 16–18, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/ifrirussianmilitarypowermcdermottengmars09.pdf; Joseph Kyle, 'Russia's "New Look" Military Reforms and Their Impact on Russian Foreign Policy', THE INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS REVIEW, 21 February 2018, https://www.iar-gwu.org/blog/2018/02/22/russias-new-look-military-reforms-and-their-impact-on-russian-foreign-policy.

46 Margarete Klein and Kristian Pester, *Russia's Armed Forces on Modernisation Course: Progress and Perspectives of Military Reform* (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2014), 2–3.

47 Pavel Bučka et al., 'The Russian Federation Armed Forces Modernisation after the Russian-Gergian Conflict', *The 14th Annual International Scientific Conference*, 2 October 2021, 40–54.

48 Keith Crane et al., *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities* (RAND Corporation, 2019), 15, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2573.html.

49 Crane et al., *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces*, 61–65.

50 IISS, ed., *Russia's Military Modernisation: An Assessment* (Routledge, 2020), 7, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003143383.

51 Timothy Thomas, *Russian Lessons Learned in Syria* (MITRE Center for Technology and National Security, 2020), 19–20.

52 Cohen and O'Brien, *The Russia-Ukraine War*, 19–24.

53 Erin Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong": When Washington Realized Russia Was Actually Invading Ukraine', POLITICO, 24 February 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-oral-history-00083757.

54 Amy Mackinnon, 'U.S. Eyes Russian Military Movement Near Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 11 January 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/01/us-russia-military-movement-ukraine/; Betsy Woodruff Swan and Paul McLeary, 'Satellite Images Show New Russian Military Buildup near Ukraine', *POLITICO*, 1 November 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/01/satellite-russia-ukraine-military-518337.

55 Daryna Antoniuk, 'Russia Moves More Troops to Ukraine's Borders, Raises Concerns in Europe, US', Kyiv Post, 31 October 2021, https://archive.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/russia-moves-more-troops-to-ukraines-borders-raises-concerns-in-europe-us.html.

56 Matthew Chance et al., 'Ukraine Warns Russia Has "Almost Completed" Build-up of Forces near Border', CNN, 18 January 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/18/europe/ukraine-intelligence-russia-military-build-up-intl/index.html.

57 Stewart, 'EXCLUSIVE Russia Moves Blood Supplies near Ukraine, Adding to U.S. Concern, Officials Say'.

2.3. **Reputation and Behaviour**

Despite critiques on the influence of past behaviour on the credibility of threats in international security, recent scholarship suggests that a reputation for resolve does impact credibility, alongside factors such as stated interests and capabilities.[58] For example, states that stood firm during multiple crises are found to face fewer challenges in the future than those that did not.[59] According to this logic, a reputation of military resolve will increase the credibility of any future threats.[60] In the context of the war in Ukraine, it could be argued that Russia's previous military actions in Georgia, Syria, Crimea and the Donbas contributed to a reputation of resolve, thereby increasing the credibility of a potential invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Russia's military aggression in Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas contained many features that were also present in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion of Georgia, for example, was preceded by an anti-Western turn in Putin's foreign policy, portraying Russia's national security to be under threat. Already at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin distanced himself from the existing European security architecture, calling out "NATO expansion" and troop deployments to the borders of Russia.[61] Following the Bucharest agreement promising Georgia and Ukraine future NATO membership in April 2008, Russia accused the Georgian government of human rights violations and highlighted its interest in protecting Russian citizens in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions.[62] In August that year, Russia invaded Georgia. The annexation of Crimea and Russia's military involvement in the Donbas followed a similar pattern. In 2014, Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution and subsequent 'turn to Europe' threatened Russia's self-stated security interests in the region. Similar to the Georgian case, Russia accused the Ukrainian state of human rights violations and supported claims of independence by Russian-speaking populations in Crimea and the Donbas.[63] The buildup to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine involved a similar pattern, with Russia stating threats to its national security, accusing Ukraine of the genocide of ethnic Russians, and proclaiming the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people.[64] Given Russia's history of demonstrating military resolve in similar situations, even if leading to partial rather than full-scale invasions, the literature suggests that Russia's threats should have gained in credibility.

The literature suggests that Russia's threats should have gained in credibility.

But if Russia's stated interests, capabilities, and past behaviour pointed to a credible threat of an invasion of Ukraine, why, then, did the Western response to Russia remain limited? The answer lies in Western decision-makers' perceptions of these factors, influencing in turn their assessment of the threat posed by Russia and the demands it presented.

58 Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'The Credibility Trap: Is Reputation Worth Fighting For?', *Foreign Affairs* 103, no. 4 (2024): 118.

59 Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics', *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 492.

60 Jervis et al., 'Redefining the Debate Over Reputation and Credibility in International Security', 176–79.

61 Vladimir Putin, 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', President of Russia, 21 February 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

62 Juris Pupcenoks and Eric james Seltzer, 'Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the "Near Abroad"', *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (2021): 763–65.

63 Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, 1st edn (I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 100–110, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755603756.

64 Juris Pupcenoks and Greg R. Klein, 'First Georgia, Then Ukraine: How Russian Propaganda Justifies Invasions', The Journal of Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 9 March 2022, https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/online-exclusives/first-georgia-then-ukraine-how-russian-propaganda-justifies-invasions.

3. Western Perceptions

3.1. What Happened Before the Full-scale Invasion of February 2022: the Buildup

In the period preceding the full-scale invasion, Western governments treaded carefully in response to the renewed buildup of Russian troops, seeking to avoid escalation of what may constitute another Russian exercise in coercive diplomacy. As the crisis dragged on between April 2021 and February 2022, urgency increased among allies. The US started implementing a strategy of declassifying this intelligence in what came to be dubbed as intelligence diplomacy, in order to convince allies and the public of the necessity to prepare a response against the Russian threat.[65] As one former senior US Department of Defense official stated:

> *"And then we spent October, November, January, and first couple weeks of February, downgrading enormous amounts of very sensitive intelligence to share with allies, and with the public, because we took the threat very seriously."*[66]

"We are very worried about the position of the Russian government and the fact that they are sending soldiers to the Ukrainian border."

On 2 November, President Biden sent CIA Director Bill Burns to Moscow, according to former senior US Department of Defense official, with the mission to "*tell the Russians that we had pretty exquisite intelligence suggesting that they were planning and mobilising for a large-scale invasion of Ukraine*".[67] US Five Eyes intelligence partners Canada and the United Kingdom shared US concerns publicly. In late January, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke of the risk of an impending invasion: "We do fear an armed conflict in Ukraine. We are very worried about the position of the Russian government and the fact that they are sending soldiers to the Ukrainian border."[68] Similarly, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson highlighted the danger of a "renewed invasion", referring to "declassified compelling intelligence exposing Russian intent to install a puppet regime in Ukraine."[69]

At first, The Five Eyes' sense of urgency did not resonate with allies across the European continent. Despite numerous consultations between NATO foreign and defence ministers between October 2021 and January 2022, there was little immediate sense of urgency to act.[70]

65 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.

66 Interview 9

67 Interview 9

68 David Ljunggren, 'Canada, Echoing U.S., Says It Fears Armed Conflict Could Erupt in Ukraine', Americas, *Reuters*, 19 January 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canadas-trudeau-says-russian-aggression-toward-ukraine-unacceptable-2022-01-19/.

69 Boris Johnson, 'PM Statement on Ukraine: 25 January 2022', Prime Minister's Office, 25 January 2022, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-ukraine-25-january-2022.

70 U. S. Embassy Kyiv, 'Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability at the NATO Ministerial', U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 2 December 2021, https://ua.usembassy.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-at-the-nato-ministerial/; NATO, 'Extraordinary meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs', NATO, 7 January 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/news_190472.htm; Council of the European Union, 'Informal Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers - Gymnich', Consilium, 13 January 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2022/01/13-14/; Council of the European Union, 'Informal Meeting of Defence Ministers', Consilium, 12 January 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2022/01/12-13/.

"The worst would not happen."

French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, remained confident in a diplomatic solution to the rising tensions, asserting that "He [Putin] told me that he would not initiate an escalation."[71] French intelligence assessments from the Direction du Renseignement Militaire (DRM) and the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE) remained sceptical of the possibility of war and Putin's intentions. According to Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck, so too was the German foreign intelligence service, the German Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), as it failed to convey the likelihood of a full-scale invasion to decision-makers. Instead, Robert Habeck stated that the intelligence service reported the buildup of Russian troops along the border as "an exercise." [72] He also added that: "The worst would not happen." This assessment was shared by other European governments. In an address to parliament two weeks before the invasion, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi di Maio suggested that "Some dynamics would seem for now to reduce the scope of the risk of a full-scale Russian invasion or offensive against Ukraine."[73] While not ruling out limited military aggression against Ukraine, the Italian government deemed a diplomatic outcome of the crisis more likely. Similarly, Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs Augusto Santos Silva told reporters on 24 January 2022: "We are far from considering that the political and diplomatic path has been exhausted. On the contrary, it is underway and must be continued."[74] Only NATO allies in close proximity to Russia–the Baltics, Poland, Norway and Romania–shared the Five Eyes' concerns of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the words of Latvian President Egils Levits: "In recent weeks, Russia has significantly intensified the threat of a military invasion of Ukraine. Its rhetoric is extremely aggressive, without any respect for another country's sovereign and international law."[75] Similarly, Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis stated that Lithuania was "convinced that a real war is a likely possibility."[76] According to Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki it was these countries' geographical proximity and history with Russia that made them more aware of the threat posed by Russia and more open towards supporting Ukraine: "We realise, like few in Europe, the value of security, the importance of alliances, support of neighbours in a situation of threat, and we want to provide this support to the Ukrainian state."[77] Concluding their analysis of the unfolding situation along the border, the Norwegian Intelligence Service put it clearly and concisely: "In 2022, there is a real risk of Russia once again invading Ukraine."[78]

71 Giorgio Leali, 'Macron and Kremlin Spar over Outcome of Meeting on Ukraine', *POLITICO*, 8 February 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-macron-kremlin-ukraine-talks-crimea/.

72 'Habeck beklagt Fehleinschätzungen des BND bei Ukraine-Invasion', *DIE WELT*, 24 August 2023, https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article247065878/Habeck-beklagt-Fehleinschaetzungen-des-BND-bei-Ukraine-Invasion.html.

73 *Audiozione del Ministro Degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internationale e del Ministro della Difesa sullla crisi tra Russia e Ucraina: Hearing at Commissioni riunite e congiunte*, Senato della Repubblica XVIII Legislatura (2022). https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/407563.pdf.

74 'Portugal garante "resposta muito pesada" da UE caso Rússia avance sobre a Ucrânia', CNN Portugal, 1 January 2022, https://cnnportugal.iol.pt/augusto-santos-silva/ministerio-dos-negocios-estrangeiros/portugal-garante-resposta-muito-pesada-caso-russia-avance-sobre-a-ucrania/20220124/61eeee0f0cf2c-c58e7df00e7.
CNN Port., 'Portugal garante "resposta muito pesada" da UE caso Rússia avance sobre a Ucrânia'.

75 'Statement by the President of Latvia, Egils Levits, on the Threat of Russian Aggression against Ukraine and Demands on NATO', President of the Republic of Latvia, 26 January 2022, https://www.president.lv/en/article/statement-president-latvia-egils-levits-threat-russian-aggression-against-ukraine-and-demands-nato.

76 '"War Is Likely" Says Lithuanian FM, Calling for "Unbearable" Sanctions on Russia', Lrt.Lt, 24 January 2022, https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1596174/war-is-likely-says-lithuanian-fm-calling-for-unbearable-sanctions-on-russia.

77 'Premier w Kijowie: cała Europa i cały świat zachodni muszą się zjednoczyć na rzecz suwerenności, niepodległości i nienaruszalności terytorialnej Ukrainy', Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów, 1 February 2022, https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-w-kijowie-cala-europa-i-caly-swiat-zachodni-musza-sie-zjednoczyc-na-rzecz-suwerennosci-niepodleglosci-i-nienaruszalnosci-terytorialnej-ukrainy.

78 *Focus 2022* (Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2022), 33, https://www.etterretningstjenesten.no/publikasjoner/fokus/focus-english/Focus2022.pdf/_/attachment/inline/da948a6e-a831-492c-8a70-f52ee75cf164:df-10b1758adb85a99d3a370081ef8222dd947b07/Focus2022.pdf.

Threat perception across the NATO alliance, thus, varied greatly prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite efforts by the US and the UK to persuade allies of an impending invasion with classified and declassified intelligence, many European states and leaders were not convinced of the likelihood of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (see Figure 1 Perceptions of the likelihood of a full-scale invasion).

Figure 1. Perceptions of the likelihood of a full-scale invasion[79]

Full-scale invasion deemed unlikely	Full-scale invasion deemed likely
Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece Hungary, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Türkiye	Canada, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, United Kingdom, United States

The Five Eyes community and those European states in close geographical proximity to Russia believed in the likelihood of a full-scale Russian invasion. In contrast, many Western European states and those with closer ties to Russia did not consider a full-scale invasion likely. The classifications of countries' threat assessment of a full-scale invasion into 'unlikely' or 'likely' are a simplification of the likelihood designations used by intelligence organisations. The UK Defence Intelligence, for instance, assigns seven likelihoods ranging from a 'remote chance' representing a 0-5% likelihood, to a 'realistic possibility' (40-50%) up to 'almost certain' (95-100%). The public statements that were manually coded by our team of analysts did not allow for such finer-grained classifications. Instead, they informed our dichotomous classification of states into 'full-scale invasion deemed unlikely' (coded 'unlikely' and 'likely – small-scale') and 'full-scale invasion deemed likely' (coded likely – full-scale').[80]

Many Western European states and those with closer ties to Russia did not consider a full-scale invasion likely.

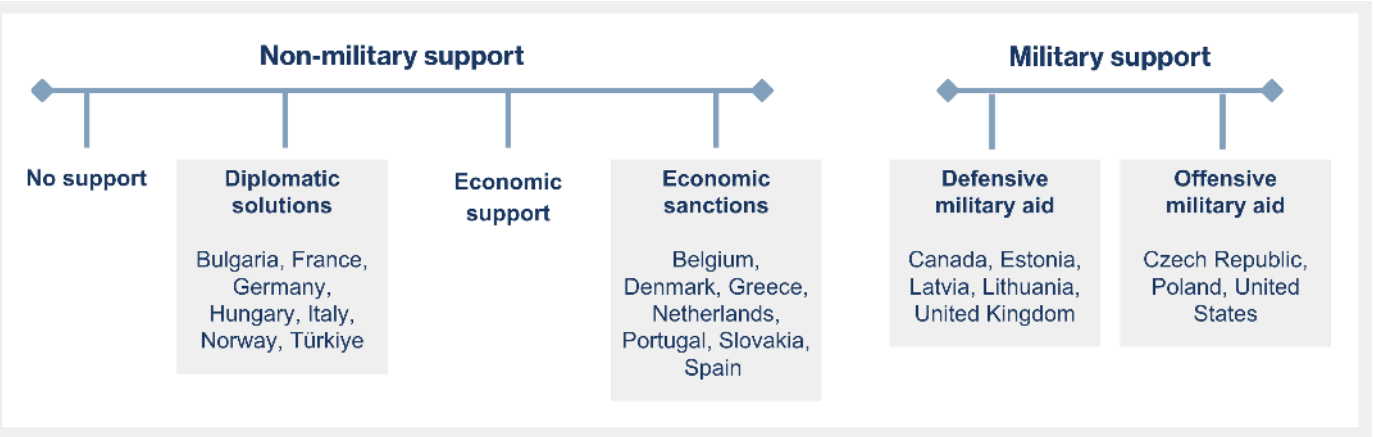
[79] No conclusive data was found for Croatia, Denmark and Iceland. Albania, Luxembourg, Montenegro and North Macedonia were excluded from the analysis.

[80] 'Defence Intelligence – Communicating Probability', Ministry of Defence, 17 February 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-intelligence-communicating-probability.

3.2. Support for Ukraine: Doves, Deer, Buzzards and Wolves

Based on different perceptions of the likelihood of an invasion, NATO allies developed their individual and collective responses to the Russian threat against Ukraine. In the months from the first April buildup leading up to the invasion, many governments offered various forms of diplomatic and economic support, such as the EU financing military medical units, including field hospitals, engineering, mobility and logistics units, and support on cyber, while at the same time preparing for the imposition of economic sanctions.[81] Only a few countries, provided defensive or offensive military aid to Ukraine such as the US sending *Stinger* anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank missiles, small arms, boats, drones, artillery and ammunition (see Figure 2).[82] Defensive and offensive military aid are defined based on definitions by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE),[83] and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).[84]

Figure 2. Western support to Ukraine in the pre-invasion phase of the war



81 'European Peace Facility: Council Adopts Assistance Measures for Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and the Republic of Mali - European Commission', accessed 26 March 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-assistance-measures-georgia-republic-moldova-ukraine-and-2021-12-02_en.

82 Elias Yousif, 'U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine', *Stimson Center*, 26 January 2022, https://www.stimson.org/2022/u-s-military-assistance-to-ukraine/.

83 Defensive military aid is defined as small arms and light weapons (SALW) and includes the following: "revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; sub-machine guns; assault rifles; and light machine guns. Light weapons are broadly categorized as those weapons intended for use by several members of armed or security forces serving as a crew. They include heavy machine guns; hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers; portable anti-aircraft guns; portable anti-tank guns; recoilless rifles; portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems; portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems; and mortars of calibres less than 100 mm."

84 'SIPRI Arms Transfers Database - Sources and Methods', SIPRI, accessed 21 November 2024, https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods. Offensive military aid is defined as heavy weaponry and includes the following: aircraft; air defence systems; anti-submarine warfare weapons; armoured vehicles; artillery (naval, fixed and mobile); mortars of calibres equal to or above 100mm; engines; missiles; sensors; and satellites. Offensive military aid is defined as heavy weaponry and includes the following: aircraft; air defence systems; anti-submarine warfare weapons; armoured vehicles; artillery (naval, fixed and mobile); mortars of calibres equal to or above 100mm; engines; missiles; sensors; and satellites.

Based on their threat perception of Russia, assessment of the likelihood of an invasion, and the type of support provided to Ukraine, NATO allies can be divided into groups of Doves, Deer, Buzzards, and Wolves, as visualised in Table 2. Doves perceived neither an existential threat from Russia nor a high likelihood of a full-scale invasion, and did not provide military support to Ukraine. Deer saw Russia as an existential threat and perceived the likelihood of an invasion to be high. Fearing inadvertent escalation, however, they only provided non-military support to Ukraine. Buzzards did not consider Russia to constitute an existential threat, but considered a full-scale invasion likely and provided military support to Ukraine. Wolves, in turn, provided military support to Ukraine, as they considered Russia to be an existential threat to their country and thought a full-scale invasion to be likely.

Table 2. National political leadership opinion on support for Ukraine, perceived likelihood of an invasion and perceived threat of Russia

	Non-military support	Military support	
Full-scale invasion deemed unlikely	**Doves** Russia non-existential threat Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Türkiye	No countries	
Full-scale invasion deemed likely	**Deers** Russia existential threat Norway, Romania	**Buzzards** Russia non-existential threat Canada, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, United States	**Wolves** Russia existential threat Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland

Note: an existential threat is defined as endangering the survival of the state

Doves. The largest group consists of NATO member states that did not consider a full-scale invasion likely and did not perceive Russia as an existential threat to their country. In their support for Ukraine in the months leading up to the invasion, Doves emphasised the search for diplomatic solutions. Here, the use of sanctions was considered the stick and was kept in reserve only to be implemented after a possible Russian invasion. Many of these Doves regarded the 2014 and 2015 Minsk Agreements and diplomatic efforts as the basis for a solution to the rising tensions on the Ukrainian border. German Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock, for example, stated in parliament that "There is only one solution to the

Russian aggression, and that is called diplomacy," highlighting the importance of discussions being held in various forums: in the Strategic Dialogue between the US and Russia, the NATO-Russia Council, the OSCE, and the Minsk Format.[85] Similarly, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio hailed the "negotiating efforts that are being developed in the Normandy format composed of France, Germany, Ukraine and Russia, and in the Trilateral Contact Group coordinated by the OSCE."[86] Additionally, France's President Emmanuel Macron put a lot of political capital into continuing bilateral conversations with Putin.[87] A few days before the invasion, Macron publicly announced that Putin was willing to talk and meet with US President Joe Biden, to no avail.[88]

Meanwhile, in coordination with the G7 and the EU, the United States was driving the preparation of economic sanctions to be imposed in the event of Russian military aggression.[89] In an attempt to show strength and unity, heads of government around Europe repeated the same message, in the words of Spanish President Pedro Sánchez: "In the event of a possible military intervention, it will have massive and extremely serious consequences for its economy in terms of sanctions by the European Union."[90]

There was no agreement on the magnitude of these sanctions, however, between Doves and more forward-leaning states. While the US and the UK advocated for cutting Russia off from the international financial system through SWIFT, this option was set aside fearing the financial consequences it could have for Western businesses.[91] The German coalition government was divided over imposing sanctions on Nord Stream 2, undermining the credibility of energy-related sanctions against Russia.[92] Thus, while an attempt was made to signal the imposition of unified economic sanctions in the event of military aggression, the specifics of these sanctions remained unclear.

For some Doves, a historically closer political alignment with Russia played a role in their threat perception and support for Ukraine. Most notably, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán opposed economic sanctions against Russia: "We support the independence of Ukraine, but we are not at all happy about the sanctions against the Russians. We think that Ukraine has the right to its own national existence, and Hungary has the right to maintain

85 *Plenarprotokoll 20/10*, Deutscher Bundestag 10 (2022). https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20010.pdf#P.477.

86 *Audiozione del Ministro Degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internationale e del Ministro della Difesa sullla crisi tra Russia e Ucraina*, 5.

87 Joseph Downing, 'Ukraine: Why Emmanuel Macron's Open Line to Moscow Has Not Delivered the International Prestige He Expected', The Conversation, 14 March 2022, http://theconversation.com/ukraine-why-emmanuel-macrons-open-line-to-moscow-has-not-delivered-the-international-prestige-he-expected-178855.

88 Eglantine Staunton, 'A Useful Failure: Macron's Overture to Russia', *Survival* 64, no. 2 (2022): 20, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2055819.

89 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.

90 'Joint Appearance by the President of the Government of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Finland, Sanna Marin, before the Media at Moncloa Palace', La Moncloa, 26 January 2022, https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/intervenciones/Paginas/2022/20220126_joint-appearance.aspx.

91 Piotr Buras, 'The EU's Unforgivable Failure', ECFR, 19 January 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/the-eus-unforgivable-failure/; Martin Greive and Moritz Koch, 'Russland: Swift-Sanktionen vom Tisch', Handelsblatt, 17 January 2022, https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/ukraine-krise-swift-sanktionen-vom-tisch-eu-und-usa-ruecken-vom-ausschluss-russlands-aus-globalem-finanzsystem-ab/27982580.html.

92 Joseph Nasr and Sarah Marsh, 'In Ukraine Crisis, Germany Faces Tough Decisions over Gas Pipeline', Europe, *Reuters*, 20 January 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-germany-faces-tough-decisions-over-gas-pipeline-2022-01-20/.

reasonable relations with Russia."[93] Similarly, when asked about the Russian buildup of troops, Turkish President Recep Erdoğan referred to the close ties between both countries: "Türkiye has relations with Russia in a peaceful manner that has not existed in its history. These relations between Russia and Türkiye continue to develop on a political, military, economic and cultural basis."[94] These close ties could make Türkiye the mediator of peace, according to Erdoğan: "Therefore, we can be the mediators for peace to come between Russia and Ukraine, especially for peace to prevail."[95] Finally, in Bulgaria Russia's buildup of military troops and subsequent invasion exposed old societal and political divides about the country's stance towards Russia.[96] Political and societal divisions hindered the provision of substantial political and military support for Ukraine.

Deer. Norway and Romania deemed an invasion likely and perceived Russia as an existential threat, but did not provide Ukraine with military support in the buildup to the invasion. Perhaps perceiving an increased threat against their own country, these Deer feared further escalation of the crisis. In its 2022 threat assessment, the Norwegian Intelligence Service designated Russia the main military threat to the country:

> "The modernised Russian armed forces pose the main military threat to Norway's sovereignty, population, territory, key functions in society and infrastructure. The Russian armed forces are geared to operate across the entire conflict spectrum, from peace to crisis and war."[97]

"The crisis is not just about Ukraine, security on the Black Sea, or European security, but about security of the Euro-Atlantic area. [...] We must be prepared for an attack scenario."

Similarly, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis expressed the threat Russia could pose to Romania:

> "Romania has 600 kilometres of borders with Ukraine, so we must be prepared for any possible scenario. The crisis is not just about Ukraine, security on the Black Sea, or European security, but about security of the Euro-Atlantic area. [...] We must be prepared for an attack scenario."[98]

Norway and Romania form an exception to the group of existentially threatened states. While they perceived a great likelihood of a Russian invasion, their responses were limited. Under existential threat of Russia, Norway and Romania seemed to be more concerned with the risk of inadvertent escalation that could endanger their countries. In the words of Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre: "We could talk about confidence-building measures,

93 'Orbán Viktor Válaszai a Felmerült Újságírói Kérdésekre', Magyarország Kormánya, 22 December 2022, https://kormany.hu/beszedek-interjuk/miniszterelnok/orban-viktor-valaszai-a-felmerult-ujsagiroi-kerdesekre-20211222. A position that was later repeated by Minister of Finance Péter Szijjárto 'Szijjártó Péter: Magyarország Ellenzi Az Ukrajnai Helyzet Élezését, Támogatja a Diplomáciai Megoldást', Magyarország Kormánya, 24 January 2022, https://kormany.hu/hirek/szijjarto-peter-magyarorszag-ellenzi-az-ukrajnai-helyzet-elezeset-tamogatja-a-diplomaciai-megoldast.

94 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Rusya ve Ukrayna Arasında Bir Barışın Hâkim Olmasına Biz Ara Bulucu Olabiliriz', Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İletişim Başkanlığı, 21 January 2022, https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-rusya-ve-ukrayna-arasinda-bir-barisin-hakim-olmasina-biz-arabulucu-olabiliriz.

95 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İletişim Başkanl., 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Rusya ve Ukrayna Arasında Bir Barışın Hâkim Olmasına Biz Ara Bulucu Olabiliriz'.

96 Svetoslav Todorov, 'Ukraine Invasion Rekindles Divisions Over Russia in Bulgaria', Balkan Insight, 25 February 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/25/ukraine-invasion-rekindles-divisions-over-russia-in-bulgaria/.

97 *Focus 2022*, 30.

98 Madalin Necsutu and Svetoslav Todorov, 'Romania, Bulgaria to Strengthen Security Amid Ukraine War Fears', BalkanInsight, 26 January 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/26/romania-bulgaria-to-strengthen-security-amid-ukraine-war-fears/.

disarmament and avoiding behaviour that makes one neighbour unsafe for the other."[99] Likewise, Romanian Prime Minister Klaus Johannis was primarily concerned with maintaining deterrence on NATO's eastern flank, while stressing the need to decrease tensions in the region.[100] In an effort to avoid further escalation, both countries emphasised the importance of finding a diplomatic solution and supported the imposition of economic sanctions.

Buzzards. Buzzards did not perceive Russia as an existential threat to their country, but did deem it likely that an invasion would take place. Unlike Doves and Deer, Buzzards did provide Ukraine with both defensive and offensive military aid. In addition to worrying about the territorial integrity of Ukraine itself, these states were concerned with the broader implications of a Russian invasion on European security and the integrity of the international liberal order. In the words of US President Joe Biden: "We made clear to the international community the full implications of that threat, not just for Ukraine, but for core tenets of the UN Charter and the modern international order."[101]

Buzzards did not perceive Russia as an existential threat to their country, but did deem it likely that an invasion would take place.

Similarly, referring to the European unity after the fall of the Iron Curtain, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson noted:

> "We will not reopen that divide by agreeing to overturn the European security order because Russia has placed a gun to Ukraine's head. Nor can we accept the doctrine–implicit in Russian proposals–that all states are sovereign, but some are more sovereign than others."[102]

Spearheading this group of Buzzards was the US, committing in December 2021 to a $200 million multi-phase aid package for Ukraine, in addition to increasing its 2022 commitment under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative by $50 million to $300 million.[103] The deliveries incrementally brought in small arms, ammunition, *Javelin* anti-tank systems, bunker-defeat M141 munitions and transport helicopters on 29 January 2022.[104] Likewise, US' Five Eyes partners the UK and Canada provided Ukraine with small arms and ammunition, and next-generation light anti-tank weapons (NLAW), respectively.[105] The Czech Republic too provided military aid to Ukraine in the form of 152 mm artillery ammunition. According to Minister of Defence Jana Černochová, Czech support to Ukraine was driven by common

99 Nettavisen Nyheter and NTB, 'Biden Fikk Høre Om Norges Naboskap Med Russland', Nettavisen, 28 January 2022, https://www.nettavisen.no/12-95-3424237667.

100 'Reuniunea informala a ministrilor apararii din statele membre ale UE', Ministerul Apararii Nationale, accessed 4 November 2024, https://www.mapn.ro/cpresa/17229_reuniunea-informala-a-mini%C8%99trilor-apararii-din-statele-membre-ale-ue; Necsutu and Todorov, 'Romania, Bulgaria to Strengthen Security Amid Ukraine War Fears'.

101 'Statement on the United Nations Security Council Meeting on the Situation in Ukraine | The American Presidency Project', accessed 3 October 2024, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-united-nations-security-council-meeting-the-situation-ukraine.

102 Johnson, 'PM Statement on Ukraine'.

103 Monique Beals, 'Ukraine Receives Second Batch of Weapons from US: "And This Is Not the End"', Text, *The Hill*, 23 January 2022, https://thehill.com/policy/international/590986-ukraine-receives-second-batch-of-weapons-from-us-and-this-is-not-the-end/; 'U.S. Congress Includes $300 Million for Ukraine, Addresses China in Massive Defense Bill | Reuters', accessed 26 March 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-congress-includes-300-million-ukraine-addresses-china-massive-defense-bill-2021-12-07/.

104 'US Delivers 300 More Javelins to Ukraine', January 26, 2022, https://kyivindependent.com/us-delivers-300-more-javelins-to-ukraine/.; Joseph Trevithick, 'Here's What Those "Bunker-Defeat" Rockets The U.S. Sent To Ukraine Are Actually Capable Of', The War Zone, 26 January 2022, https://www.twz.com/44021/heres-what-those-bunker-defeat-rockets-the-u-s-sent-to-ukraine-are-actually-capable-of.

105 Joe Biden, 'Statement on the United Nations Security Council Meeting on the Situation in Ukraine I', The American Presidency Project, accessed 4 November 2024, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-united-nations-security-council-meeting-the-situation-ukraine; Claire Mills, 'Detailed Timeline of UK Military Assistance to Ukraine (February 2022-Present)', House of Commons, n.d., accessed 4 November 2024, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9914/CBP-9914.pdf.

historical roots in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the potential influx of refugees in the event of an escalation.[106]

Wolves. Four states perceived Russia as an existential threat to their country and believed in the likelihood of an invasion. Fearing they could be next, they provided military support to Ukraine. Like a wolf defending its pack against bears, these states were resolute in protecting not only their territory and citizens against the Russian threat, but also extending support to Ukraine. Key drivers for these Wolves–Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland–were their shared histories and experiences with Russia. In a speech to parliament, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs expressed this regional sentiment:

Fearing they could be next, they provided military support to Ukraine.

> "Russia is Latvia's largest neighbour and at the same time the one that poses the greatest political challenge. We are under no illusions about this. We know our neighbour and we have witnessed Russia's behaviour for centuries. It has been particularly violent during the 20th century."[107]

Or as then-Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas expressed it: "[What] we have long suspected to be the case is now very clearly being spelt out: Russia's aim is to restore its political and military influence over its neighbours."[108] While their histories with Russia made them uniquely aware of potential threats posed by Russia, their warnings did not find much traction with all allies in the alliance.[109] Because of the urgency they felt, these states were among the first to provide Ukraine with military aid. In a joint statement, the Baltic states announced on 21 January 2022 that they had received approvals to provide Ukraine with US-made weapons. In an attempt to strengthen Ukraine's defensive capabilities, Estonia provided Ukraine with *Javelin* anti-armour missiles, while Latvia and Lithuania transferred *Stinger* anti-aircraft missiles.[110] Likewise, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki promised on 1 February to provide "Ukraine with several dozen thousand pieces of artillery shells and ammunition, anti-aircraft missile sets, but also light mortars and reconnaissance drones and other types of defensive weapons."[111]

106 Tereza Šídlová and Martina Machová, 'Žádost Ukrajiny o České Vojáky Bychom Brali Velmi Vážně, Říká Černochová - Seznam Zprávy', 22 January 2022, https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-zadost-ukrajiny-o-ceske-vojaky-bychom-brali-velmi-vazne-rika-cernochova-186342.

107 Edgars Rinkēvičs, 'Speech by Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs at the Annual Foreign Policy Debate in the Latvian Parliament (Saeima)', Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 January 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/media/5285/download?attachment.

108 Kaja Kallas, 'Prime Minister's Political Statement on the Security Situation in Europe', Republic of Estonia Government, 19 January 2022, https://valitsus.ee/en/news/prime-ministers-political-statement-security-situation-europe-19012022.

109 Robyn Dixon, 'Baltic Nations Long Warned about Russia. Now, Maybe the West Is Listening.', *Washington Post*, 12 October 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/12/baltics-poland-russia-warnings-nato/.

110 'Baltic Defence Ministers Issue a Joint Statement on Sending Weapons to Ukraine', Republic of Estonia Ministry of Defence, 21 January 2022, https://kaitseministeerium.ee/en/news/baltic-defence-ministers-issue-joint-statement-sending-weapons-ukraine.

111 Kancel. Prezesa Rady Minist., 'Premier w Kijowie'.

3.3. Conclusion: Ignoring a Clear and Present Danger

In the years, months, and weeks leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, there were signals that could have been interpreted by Western decision-makers as indicative of a credible Russian threat. Russia had repeatedly stated its interest in controlling the country, having formally warned NATO members of its intentions. It was widely perceived that Russia possessed the capability to invade Ukraine–although the scale of such an invasion was contested, and it had shown military resolve in similar situations in the past. Despite best efforts by the US and the UK to share available intelligence with allies, threat perception across many members of the alliance remained limited. Many states did not perceive a high likelihood of a full-scale invasion and deliberately limited their responses to seeking a diplomatic solution complemented with preparations to impose economic sanctions should Russia carry out a minor incursion. Only a few decision-makers and their advisors considered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine likely, with some of them considering Russia as an existential threat to their own country. Only these states provided Ukraine with military aid before the invasion unfolded. Compared to the levels of support seen after the invasion, however, even the response of these countries paled in comparison. The following chapters take a closer look at the perceptions of key decision-makers and their advisors, in more detailed case studies, starting with NATO HQ, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and the US.

Only a few decision-makers and their advisors considered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine likely.

4. From "Brain Dead" to Crisis Forum: NATO HQ

The evolving tensions between Russia and Ukraine during the buildup to the full-scale invasion fundamentally tested NATO's cohesion. Having been declared "brain dead" by French President Macron in 2019, the organisation re-emerged as the cornerstone of their collective defence effort especially for many smaller European allies. As Russia escalated its military posture and rhetoric towards Ukraine, a non-NATO member, NATO's core mission which is to guarantee the security and freedom of its treaty-states, guided its response. Although no real fractures emerged within the alliance during the lead-up to the crisis, the period did expose divisions. Allies assessed the threat posed by Russia very differently which in turn informed different strategic approaches to deterring Russian aggression. As argued by one senior NATO official, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, acted as a bridge-builder, attempting to ensure "*having those conversations politically, touching base with all the key capitals, making sure that the response would be NATO's response and not, let's say, different capitals singing slightly different tunes.*"[112] According to another NATO official this was a deliberate part of NATO's broader strategy, which prioritised projecting unity and managing perceptions, even in the face of internal differences: "*The optics of not agreeing is considered the worst of all possible worlds.*"[113]

4.1. NATO-Russian Relations: From Bad to Worse

The relationship between Russia and NATO had featured ongoing disputes over NATO's enlargement that ran counter to Russia's vision of its sphere of influence and what the European security architecture should look like. In 2007, President Vladimir Putin publicly denounced the US-led unipolar world order and NATO's enlargement in his infamous Munich Security Conference Speech, warning of its negative consequences for Russia's security. Following NATO opening its door to membership for Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Russia invaded Georgia in the short Russia-Georgia war in August 2008. Then US Ambassador to Russia Bill Burns had already warned about this in a February 2008 memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, stating that offering NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine could be seen as a provocation by Russia.[114] In 2009, Moscow

[112] Interview 2

[113] Interview 44

[114] William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2019).

proposed the 'Medvedev Initiative' which envisioned a new European security architecture.[115] The agreement would prohibit any state from ensuring its own security at the expense of others while restricting military alliances that undermine common security.[116] The initiative did not go anywhere, and subsequent efforts to repair NATO-Russia relations did not yield lasting results.[117] The subsequent 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a turning point for NATO and its members, prompting the alliance to bolster its military posture in Eastern Europe, step up support for Ukraine, and implement a first round of economic sanctions against Russia. These developments considerably imprinted Russia as a strategic threat in the perception of senior political and military policymakers working at the HQ level and at NATO's Allied Command Operations.

In April 2021, when Russia amassed its forces along Ukraine's borders, alarm bells therefore started ringing at NATO HQ. Among some permanent staff, the Russian threat was quickly taken seriously. As one high-ranking NATO military official put it: "*It was immediately clear that it was a large-scale Russian invasion, unlike the Crimea incursion, when the 'green men' were not immediately labelled as Russians*."[118] For others, however, the implications of the threat posed remained unclear, as another senior NATO military official recounted:

> "*At that time NATO thought it was extremely concerning [...] [and] it was perceived [as] coercion of Ukraine although it was not clear whether it was going to be long or short term*"[119]

"For too long, politicians have viewed the world as they hoped it to be—predictable, controllable, and shaped by their decisions."

This heightened threat awareness did not lead to a change in NATO's posture, however, as Ukraine was not part of NATO and thus lay outside its core mandate. According to a senior NATO official, "*This was also very present behind the scenes. Since it was Ukraine and not NATO, there was a lot less urgency.*"[120] Even in the case of NATO membership, a change in posture would have required a political decision by the North Atlantic Council and approval by the, at the time, 30 member states. Such political resolve could not be expected, as the same high-ranking NATO military official observed that "*For too long, politicians have viewed the world as they hoped it to be—predictable, controllable, and shaped by their decisions*."[121] In addition to these procedural hurdles, NATO allies' strategic attention was also distracted by Afghanistan, where alliance members were preparing for the final stages of their withdrawal. As a result, decisions about NATO's posture were delayed until the threat had become more concrete later that year.

Russia's annual Zapad exercise held in September 2021 amplified fears of a looming conflict among NATO officials, especially when seen in conjunction with the continued Russian military buildup near Ukraine's borders. NATO officials warned that the drills, "which follow a huge Russian military buildup on Ukraine's borders earlier this year, increase the risk of an accident

115 Yury Fedorov, 'Medvedev\'s Initiative: A Trap for Europe?', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025), https://cejiss.org/medvedev-s-initiative-a-trap-for-europe.

116 'A New Security Architecture for Europe? Russian Proposal and Western Reactions - Egmont Institute', accessed 4 April 2025, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/a-new-security-architecture-for-europe-russian-proposal-and-western-reactions/.

117 Roy Allison, 'The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia: International Law, Norms and Political Calculation', *European Security* 18, no. 2 (2009): 173–200, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662830903468734.

118 Interview 26

119 Interview 12

120 Interview 44

121 Interview 26

or miscalculation that could touch off a crisis".[122] Despite NATO HQ viewing the exercise as escalatory, its institutional response remained measured.[123]

By early October, tensions escalated further. NATO expelled eight Russian diplomats from its mission in Brussels who were, according to a NATO official, "*undeclared Russian intelligence officers*."[124] In retaliation Moscow decided to strip the credentials of NATO staff members in Russia. NATO responded to the move by stating that it "*regret[ted] Russia's decision*", while the wider alliance perceived the move as escalatory and responded with decisive measures.[125]

In mid-December 2021, Russia presented its *démarche* to the US and to NATO which NATO officials considered to be "*not acceptable*," and subsequently rejected.[126] On 28 January 2022, NATO reinforced its eastern flank, with the US placing 8,500 troops on heightened alert while Moscow continued its military buildup. While not formally authorised, military planners at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) began informally preparing for more proactive deterrent responses in case of further escalation, while its primary focus remained on implementing the existing Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). Meanwhile, at NATO HQ in Brussels political negotiations among the thirty Alliance members ensued about the alliance's appropriate response. Because decisions by the North Atlantic Council require unanimity, the alliance is bound by its lowest common denominator. This turned out to be the recognition that member states needed to respond as a united front when it came to Ukraine's sovereignty while at the same time making clear that it was not a NATO member and therefore Article 5 did not apply.[127] NATO would defend itself if invaded and stood behind Ukrainian sovereignty, but would not extend its territorial defence commitments to Ukraine.

NATO would defend itself if invaded and stood behind Ukrainian sovereignty, but would not extent its territorial defence commitments to Ukraine.

4.2. **No Consensus on the Threat**

Discussions at NATO HQ about the threat posed by Russia in the lead-up to the invasion were shaped by varying degrees of scepticism among its staff and member states. As discussed in the previous chapter, certain allies held on to the idea that Putin would not actually go through with an invasion as the buildup was perceived as an attempt to renegotiate the European security architecture. Sceptical member states and NATO staff "*trusted Russia's assurances that no invasion would occur, exposing intelligence gaps within the NATO alliance*," as one senior NATO official related.[128] The scepticism remained a prominent factor up until "*at least one month before the invasion, [after which] there was consensus that war was going to*

122 'Russia and Belarus Formally Open Huge War Games, Worrying NATO', World, *Reuters*, 9 September 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-belarus-formally-open-huge-war-games-worrying-nato-2021-09-09/.

123 *Reuters*, 'Russia and Belarus Formally Open Huge War Games, Worrying NATO'.

124 *Russia to Suspend Nato Diplomatic Mission amid Tension*, 18 October 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58959386.

125 NATO, 'Military Liaison Mission Moscow', NATO, accessed 7 April 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50341.htm.

126 Interview 2

127 Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

128 Interview 12

happen" as one senior NATO official recounted.[129] Another former high-ranking NATO military official recalled that for policymakers at NATO HQ, an important initial turning point resulted from US intelligence diplomacy with "*US intelligence briefings in November 2021 provid[ing] high-confidence assessments detailing Russia's intent to invade, including the use of false flag operations.*"[130] One interviewee observed that *"it came with assessments that Kyiv would fall within 72 hours, which also slowed the NATO response because nobody thought Ukraine had a chance.*"[131] This still prompted NATO member states to begin sharing intelligence more systematically. As one former NATO official noted:

> "*Intelligence sharing among key NATO allies—including the US, UK, Nordics, and Poland—greatly enhanced the alliance's situational awareness and ability to assess the impending threat*."[132]

Still, the same interviewee highlighted that: "*Some NATO allies remained unconvinced of the invasion risk, in part due to Ukraine's own downplaying of intelligence warnings.*"[133]

These inconsistencies in threat perception across the alliance inhibited the preparation of more forceful responses politically. Paraphrasing a high-ranking NATO military official, NATO intelligence recognised the invasion threat, but there was no consensus among allies.[134] The official also argued that even with US efforts, led by then US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, which provided crucial evidence of Russia's military buildup, the threat assessment was not universally accepted among allies.[135] As a result, NATO's collective response was constrained.

The different threat perceptions within NATO were not just the result of how intelligence was interpreted, but were rooted in deeper historical experiences, geographical proximity to Russia, and long-standing strategic assumptions. Eastern European states, shaped by past Soviet control and their closeness to Russia, were quicker to accept the invasion threat. In contrast, Western European states, having invested both diplomatically and economically in their relations with Russia, were slower to shift their thinking. Doing so meant questioning sometimes decades of official policies and adjusting the worldviews that shaped them. As one senior NATO official described it:

> "*Depending on how close you sit to Russia and what's your relationship to Russia historically, breaking that, reconciling that dichotomy became easier. So, in other words, I think for East-Central, for, Latvia or Poland, for them it wasn't a big mental switch and they said, okay, we're going to believe the evidence. For countries that had, like Germany or France as well, invested so much in the political process, Minsk, etc, etc, and also the peace dividend, we all know what the facts are, trusting, believing the facts means essentially admitting that a lot of the strategic assumptions were fundamentally wrong, so that took longer*."[136]

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129 Interview 2
130 Interview 3
131 Interview 44
132 Interview 3
133 Interview 3
134 Interview 17
135 Interview 17
136 Interview 2

In an effort to create shared situational awareness and understanding among thirty alliance members, a high-ranking NATO military official recalled that "*The NATO Joint Intelligence Center, established in November 2021, held weekly briefings, tracking Russia's military buildup and preparations.*"[137] This initiative represented a concerted effort to align intelligence efforts and improve the alliance's overall situational awareness, mitigating some of the earlier inconsistencies in threat assessments. Paraphrasing a high-ranking NATO military official, although intelligence reports on logistics, troop movements, and supplies indicated an imminent attack, some allies still disputed Putin's intent.[138]

In discussing the sources of disputation, one senior NATO official recounted:

> "*These are the numbers. and then some of the questions inevitably would be: 'But why would Putin do this? This is not in his interest'. And the intelligence response is: 'This is what we see.*"[139]

Eventually, as evidence mounted, the mood within the Alliance began to shift. The official continued:

> "*So I would say [...] in the month, you mentioned mid-January, [...] maybe even earlier, by then, there was the assumption that this one was going to [happen], that there were preparations, capabilities, and intent.*"[140]

4.3. Political Caution alongside Military Preparation

The preparation of the deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area was the core focus at NATO HQ, alongside the coordination of a unified diplomatic response to Russia. Discussions held within the Normandy format (consisting of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine) in the context of the Minsk 2 Agreement made little progress, while the NATO-Russia Council meeting on 12 January 2022 also resulted in deadlock.[141] In the words of a senior NATO official, diplomacy proved challenging, as "*part of that did prey on some of our vulnerabilities, including low-risk aversion. Russia knows we want peace, which is good. But if you want, it's like you enter a negotiation and your opponent knows that you will do anything to make this stop. It's not a great place to start.*"[142] Russia identified NATO's preference for peaceful resolutions as a vulnerability, leveraging this inclination in negotiations to delay decisive action. Consequently, NATO shifted its focus toward deterring Russia from contemplating an attack on Allied territory. As one former high-ranking NATO military official put it:

> "*All of the key allies, the US and others, their general strategy was to deter through explaining consequences to Russia and that they were aware of the preparation and the potential for invasion [...]. And then to assure the allies don't feel threatened by potential*

137 Interview 26

138 Interview 17

139 Interview 2

140 Interview 2

141 'NATO Open to More Russia Talks amid Ukraine Tensions', Deutsche Welle (DW), 12 January 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/nato-open-to-more-talks-with-russia-amid-ukraine-tensions/a-60395247.

142 Interview 2

> *aggression, you know, the neighbouring allies. And then, of course, demonstrate that NATO was going to defend itself from potential Russian aggression through [...] increas[ing] the strategic awareness and the ability to respond in case of [...] escalation of the threat to NATO.*"[143]

Yet, despite the fact that NATO was and is a political-military organisation, deterrence efforts focused on economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation as the primary instruments of coercion. This was done to avoid direct military confrontation with Russia while exerting pressure through non-military means. As one senior official explained "*Military deterrence was avoided to prevent diluting Article 5 commitments.*"[144] This cautious approach grew from key members' concern of further antagonising Russia and escalating the situation, combined with doubts within the alliance about Russia's intention to invade discussed earlier As related by a former high-ranking NATO military official, the alliance's approach was to signal severe consequences to Russia: "*NATO began, then, I think, the US very clearly, to explain the consequences. If Russia invades, these are the consequences you can expect. And it would have all the consequences.*"[145] As it became increasingly clear that Russia was stalling, diplomatic relations soured further. As related by a senior NATO official, when the NATO-Russian Council convened "*it was in an unusual way, without previous agreement with Russia [...] Usually we would talk with Russia, agree on a time and date and schedule together the Council.*" [146] The same official argued that this was to no avail: "*Think about the demands made by Russia to NATO. [...] That to me does not suggest a genuine Putin's effort to negotiate.*"[147] Paraphrasing a high-ranking NATO military official, during the meeting on 12 January, there were no concessions from NATO, rejecting Russia's demand to roll back to pre-1997 alliance borders.[148] The meeting would turn out to be the last meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, and was taken as a signal by NATO's military leadership to start planning for the moment when things would escalate further, once they would get the official green light from the political leadership.

Military deterrence was avoided to prevent diluting Article 5 commitments.

4.4. From Recognition to Rapid Response

While NATO prioritised intelligence collection and efforts on the diplomatic front, military preparations for the defence and deterrence of the Euro-Atlantic area also started taking shape. In response to Russia's buildup, paraphrasing a former high-ranking NATO military official, NATO reassured eastern allies by increasing defence readiness and strategic awareness.[149] It did so by implementing specific measures to reinforce deterrence such as aircraft patrols, signalling NATO's military preparedness and commitment to defending its member states, according to another senior NATO official.[150] These efforts were part of the prearranged Readiness Actions Plan (RAP) playbook formulated at the Wales summit in 2014. The RAP aimed to strengthen NATO's deterrence position by permanently placing a small but capable combat force on the eastern border. These measures could be implemented and expanded whenever the need or political will for it emerged. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine ultimately did both, but real urgency only developed one month before the invasion, as

143 Interview 3
144 Interview 12
145 Interview 3
146 Interview 12
147 Interview 12
148 Interview 17
149 Interview 3
150 Interview 12

a senior NATO official recalled: "*NATO's crisis coordination meetings intensified in mid-January 2022, reflecting a growing sense of urgency*."[151] While NATO's military leadership (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) was aware of the threat at this time, political consensus to take decisive action was lacking according to a high-ranking NATO military official.[152] Despite internal divisions, the official noted that the military side of NATO began revisiting its crisis response manuals. Although this amounted to little more than a few staff members reopening pre-written handbooks and reacquainting themselves with established procedures. While this did not reflect full operational readiness, it was a procedural step toward ensuring that planning and response options would be available, pending any political decision to activate them. A month later NATO held an alliance-wide exercise (Sea Breeze) in the Black Sea.[153] This exercise, as well as the wider NATO presence in the region, was meant to underscore the alliance's commitment to countering Russian assertiveness and demonstrated its willingness to challenge Moscow's growing dominance in the Black Sea region.

When the invasion ultimately materialised, NATO did respond gradually as it was quick to identify and call-out Russia's aggression, as highlighted by a high-ranking NATO military official: "*The North Atlantic Council (NAC) quickly identified Russia's actions as a full-scale invasion, unlike the 2014 Crimea annexation, which had been more ambiguous.*"[154] Because of this political decision, NATO approved its readiness plans within eight hours after the invasion, according to a high-ranking NATO military official, highlighting the effectiveness of its crisis response mechanisms.[155] Another senior NATO official notes, however, that this *"did not lead to a change in authorities for the military or towards the NATO reinforcement of troops. In the first hours/days/weeks NATO did little material in response to the invasion.*"[156] Still, the swift recognition of the threat at hand underscored NATO's lessons learned from past conflicts and reinforced its military ability to respond quickly once the political decision had been reached.

4.5. **Conclusion**

In the context of the crisis, NATO's number one priority was to defend NATO territory and prevent escalation to direct war with Russia. NATO consistently reaffirmed the importance of Article 5, while making also made clear that collective defence did not extend to Ukraine. Instead, individual member states were free to support Ukraine independently, as NATO served as a forum to discuss their policies. NATO HQ was slower in its preparation, being dependent on member states both for information and for authorisation to implement planning. However, NATO military HQ was able to get back on track in the initial months of the conflict. For more than eight years, military planners had been preparing for the potential outbreak of war, allowing NATO states to swiftly implement pre-established contingency plans once the situation escalated. These preparations included scrambling jets for patrols along NATO's eastern borders and mobilising rapid response forces. These measures were strictly focused on defending NATO territory and were consistent with NATO's stance from the outset, ensuring that while the Alliance reinforced its own security, it would not become directly involved in the conflict.

151 Interview 13

152 Interview 17

153 NATO, 'NATO Ships Exercise in the Black Sea', NATO, accessed 14 February 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185879.htm.

154 Interview 26

155 Interview 17

156 Interview 44

5. Diplomacy at All Costs: France

In the lead-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the French government unfailingly sought to solve the crisis through diplomatic channels right up to the very last-minute, stepping up its pressure as Russia increasingly made its expansionist ambitions clear. At the most fundamental level, senior decision-makers and their advisors considered a full-scale invasion to be unlikely. French officials failed to understand Putin's political intent and consequently dismissed the possibility of invasion, believing the return to war in Europe was highly unlikely. As a nuclear power, and with long-standing historical ties to Russia, France's leadership advocated for de-escalation. The overall understanding of the crisis at the decision-making level was guided by factors including commitment to ongoing negotiations in the Normandy Format, the perceived irrationality of large-scale war, and disbelief in Putin's stated interests. France emerges as a Dove state in our analysis because it discounted the possibility of a full-scale invasion, considered Russia to be a non-existential threat to French national security and did not offer any military support to Ukraine prior to the invasion.

5.1. A Long-standing Relationship

Since the end of the Cold War, France and Russia cultivated a close relationship, especially following the 1998 Yekaterinburg Triangle, which also included Germany, and envisioned the stabilisation of 'Grand Europe'.[157] The coalition's goal was to guarantee peace through strengthened economic and political cooperation.[158] The relationship between them continued on friendly terms, with the interests of France and Russia aligning over dissatisfaction with the US' dominance in global politics.[159] Like Russia, France envisioned the existence of a multipolar world. For instance, in 2003, France, Germany, and Russia jointly declared their opposition to the US-UK intervention in Iraq.[160] Moreover, successive French governments had always considered Russia to be a key actor within Europe's larger security architecture, emphasising the need for European states to cooperate with their neighbour. However, fractures in the French-Russian relationship started emerging with the progressively authoritarian turn taken under Putin's leadership. Still, France played a mediating role during the Georgia-Russia war in 2008 given its independent stance towards Russia more generally.[161]

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157 Thomas Gomart, 'France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values', *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007): 147, https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.2.147.

158 'Conférence de presse conjointe de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, Boris Eltsine, Président de Russie, et Helmut Kohl, Chancelier d'Allemagne, sur les projets de coopération entre la France la Russie et l'Allemagne dans le domaine spatial, des transports et des sciences humaines, sur la sécurité du continent européen et la crise du Kosovo, Moscou le 26 mars 1998', Élysée, 26 March 1998, https://www.elysee.fr/jacques-chirac/1998/03/26/conference-de-presse-conjointe-de-mm-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-republique-boris-eltsine-president-de-russie-et-helmut-kohl-chancelier-dallemagne-sur-les-projets-de-cooperation-entre-la-france-la-russie-et-lallemagne-dans-le-domaine-spatial; Gomart, 'France's Russia Policy', 147.

159 Isabelle Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales* XVI (July 2015): 118.

160 Gomart, 'France's Russia Policy', 150-151.

161 Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', 119–20.

It exemplified France's preference to keep Russia close and to avoid isolating it.[162] The 2014 invasion of Ukraine marked a caesura for French-Russian relations. France cancelled its agreement to deliver two *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships to Russia and terminated high-level discussions.[163] France also pushed for sanctions at the EU level and became involved in the negotiations of the Minsk Agreements led by Germany. French mediating efforts were pursued through the 'Normandy' format, facilitating dialogue on critical aspects of the Agreements.[164] In 2018, the French Senate and the Russian Federation Council issued a joint report on parliamentary dialogue and the importance of reestablishing trust. At the same time, the French Senate highlighted the overall degradation of Europe's security environment since the 2014 Crimea Crisis, which was "extremely worrying."[165] There was a clear perception among senior French government officials that Putin wanted to restore Russia's role as a great power. Still, it was generally considered that he would try and do so by remaining under the threshold of large-scale violence. As one senior French Ministry of Defence official recalls, the French system was "*reluctant to see that Russia would be ready to wage a large-scale war to achieve its goals because it could already secure a lot of ambition using hybrid warfare.*"[166] The French government's outlook on Russia was thus shaped by France's consideration of its own nuclear power status dealing with another nuclear power. Economic interests also played a role albeit comparatively much less so. Overall trade volume with Russia remained lower than other EU countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, even if prior to the annexation of Crimea France was Russia's third European supplier and France's third market outside the EU, excluding Switzerland.[167] This increase in economic dependence was explained by the need to match the diplomatic friendship repeatedly signalled by the two countries.[168] One high-ranking French military official observed how these economies ties influenced threat perception: "*There were so many economic links with Russia that it was totally insane to think about a war against Russia.*"[169]

Since the seizure of Crimea Russia was seen to be a threat but one that could be solved within diplomatic frameworks.

5.2. **Russia as a Localised Threat**

Among French governmental officials, Russia was perceived as a regional threat that could be contained, up until the fall of 2021. Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, since the seizure of Crimea Russia was seen to be a threat but one that could be solved within diplomatic frameworks.[170] Although Russia's massive deployment of military forces in April 2021 near the Ukrainian border certainly alerted parts of the French government, it was widely assumed that Russia was still acting in the context of the Minsk Agreements. According to one senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Russia was trying to coerce Ukraine to implement its parts of the negotiations.[171] Several aspects of the Minsk Agreements were heavily contested including the requirement for Russia to recognise

[162] David Cadier, 'Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation', *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2018): 1356.

[163] Cadier, 1360.

[164] David Carment and Dani Belo, *The Normandy Negotiations Renewed: Divisions at Home and Opportunity Abroad* (Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2020), 1.

[165] *France-Russie : dialogue parlementaire pour rétablir la confiance (version française)* (Sénat Français et Conseil de la Fédération de Russie, 2018), 17, 18, https://www.senat.fr/rap/r17-387-1/r17-387-1.html.

[166] Interview 32

[167] Cadier, 'Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia', 1351.

[168] Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', 122.

[169] Interview 27

[170] Interview 30

[171] Interview 29

the regions under its control as Ukrainian territories.[172] Russia's use of coercive diplomacy was therefore seen as a way to pressure Ukraine into making more concessions on this front rather than preparing for an actual invasion. As one senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official recalled:

> "*If the goal was to regain control of Ukraine in the way he [Putin] wanted it, then we were far more concerned about destabilisation, about economic coercion, about infiltration, about overthrowing the government from the inside, about weakening Zelensky through oligarchs than an all-out invasion. [...] We thought that this was the worst way to go for him.*"[173]

Overall, French officials found it hard to imagine a conflict scenario in which Russia would consider going to war and thought that Putin would reason the same way as they did.

The publication of Putin's summer essay did spark debate across the French government. As related by the same French official previously quoted, some argued that the essay was about embellishing Russia's claims on Crimea, whereas others became more suspicious of Putin's intents.[174] In bilateral talks, US officials did not share particular concerns over the importance of the essay, which reassured some French officials. As related by the French official: "*The Americans weren't overly concerned, which, you know, I thought mistakenly so, it [the threat] was probably not so serious. So this is late August, early September.*" [175]

The subsequent September troop buildup triggered more alarm bells in Paris. After meeting Russian Defence Minister Shoigu and Foreign Minister Lavrov in Paris in November 2021, French Foreign Minister Le Drian gave a speech in front of the French National Assembly announcing "massive strategic consequences" if Russia were to infringe Ukraine's territorial integrity.[176] As shared by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, this meant that economic and diplomatic consequences "*would be so massive that they would have a strategic implication for Russia in terms of isolation and even in terms of weakening [...] the regime's hold on power*." [177] The two countries' ministers met at the occasion of the 2021 Paris International Conference for Libya and also discussed the growing presence of the Wagner paramilitary group on African fronts, trying to destabilise French deployments.[178] With concerns over a Russian invasion, if only partial, France became involved in the drafting of EU, NATO and G7 sanction packages, as part of a collective deterrence effort.

On 15 December 2021, Putin submitted his list of demands to the US and NATO, which included NATO's return to its 1997 borders, the diminution of the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe, and more generally respect for Russia's sphere of

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172 Marie Dumoulin, 'Ukraine, Russia, and the Minsk Agreements: A Post-Mortem', European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 February 2024, https://ecfr.eu/article/ukraine-russia-and-the-minsk-agreements-a-post-mortem/.

173 Interview 31

174 Interview 31

175 Interview 31

176 'Ukraine : la Russie subira des «conséquences stratégiques massives» en cas d'attaque, avertit Paris', Le Figaro, 15 December 2021, https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/ukraine-la-russie-subira-des-consequences-strategiques-massives-en-cas-d-attaque-avertit-paris-20211215.

177 Interview 31

178 'French and Russian Ministers Hold Talks on Security Issues', Ambassade de France Au Royaume-Uni, 12 November 2021, https://uk.ambafrance.org/French-and-Russian-ministers-hold-talks-on-security-issues; Élie Tenenbaum and Amélie Zima, *Return to the East: The Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank*, no. 119, Focus Stratégique (Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2024), 25, https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/return-east-russian-threat-and-french-pivot-europes-eastern-flank.

influence in these regions.[179] As interpreted by a senior French Ministry of Defence official, the demands were seen as the "*bureaucratic translation of the ambition laid out by Putin in his article in July.*" [180] Another high-ranking French military official explained:

> "*I don't think we asked ourselves precisely why Russia had such unrealistic and fanciful demands, other than the fact that it was kind of a list of requirements intended for starting a negotiation, [...] and the final scope was to avoid any Ukrainian adhesion to NATO and to the European Union.*"[181]

The demands were seen to be one-sided and preposterous. A senior French Ministry of Defence official added:

> "*The way they were framed would essentially force NATO to unilaterally accept concessions when it comes to exercises, deployments, deployments of specific weapons, including theatre range, deep precision strike capabilities [...] which would be [...] literally unacceptable for NATO.*"[182]

The demands were seen as "the bureaucratic translation of the ambition laid out by Putin in his article in July".

Russian demands were consequently rejected at the end of January, while inviting Russia to continue the conversation.

As tensions exacerbated, French Defence officials organised multiple wargames on the possibility of a Russian attack on Ukraine. The wargames gathered civilian experts on Russia and Ukraine and focused on developing different possible scenarios. As related by a high-ranking French military official:

> "*They [all experts] thought that it would be very unlikely that there would be a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the kind of invasion we ended up with. [...] According to them, Russia would not be able to install in Kyiv a kind of a puppet government, placed under the orders of Moscow.*"[183]

Despite efforts to understand Putin's interests, French officials still downplayed the signs of a full-scale invasion.

5.3. **Give Diplomacy a Chance**

As related, in the 2010s France had attempted to maintain dialogue and anchor Russia to Europe. President Macron pursued this policy during all his successive presidential terms, reflecting a long-held tradition in French foreign and security policies.[184] On 27 August 2019, he addressed this policy in a speech at the Ambassadors' Conference, where he declared:

> *"We are part of Europe; so is Russia. And if we are unable to accomplish anything useful with Russia at any given time, we will remain in a state of deeply unproductive tension. [...] Pushing Russia away from Europe is a major strategic error, because we are pushing*

179 'Vladimir Putin Calls for Security Guarantee from West about NATO's Expansion', *ABC News*, 23 December 2021.

180 Interview 32

181 Interview 23

182 Interview 32

183 Interview 23

184 Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', 119.

> *it either toward isolation, which heightens tensions, or toward alliances with other great powers such as China, which would not at all be in our interest."*[185]

In combination with this policy tradition, the French government considers itself an unaligned country and its sovereignty and independence as key priorities. As related by a high-ranking French military official:

> *"[Since] de Gaulle, we like to be independent in the way we assess [...] the instability in the world. [...] Even if we are in NATO, we don't want to be dependent on the US or even other countries. We try to maintain a degree of independence. This degree of independence is ensured by [independence] in energy for example. [...] So, we don't want to be dependent on resources from Russia."*[186]

"There was no willingness to give Russia the impression that we were going to go to war against them or to take part in the conflict."

Because of its nuclear power status, the French government never perceived Russia as an existential threat. As argued by a high-ranking French military official, nuclear deterrence has an impact on the relationship between the two countries, which contributed to France's lack of fear regarding Russian nuclear warheads before the invasion.[187] At the same time, France's status as a nuclear-armed state incentivised Macron to maintain dialogue with Russia to prevent any possible escalation. However, the official also added: "*The political attempt to discuss [...] till the last moment [...] was something that was not understood by many countries in Europe.*"[188] According to him, France, as a nuclear power, had a different conception and understanding of the Russian threat and promoted a more balanced approach upholding de-escalation.[189] He also specified: "*There was no willingness to give Russia the impression that we were going to go to war against them or to take part in the conflict.*"[190]

While the French government focused on the diplomatic approach, other states committed to military support for Ukraine. As explained by a senior French Ministry of Defence official:

> "*If you're convinced that what [the Russians are] going to be attempting is a large-scale attrition war against Ukraine, certainly providing military aid to Ukraine becomes probably central to your effort.*" [191]

The official added that this was not France's logic because the French government was convinced Putin would not attempt such a military operation: "*There was no commonly shared view regarding the fact that a large-scale war was the most plausible outcome of that.*" [192]

There were also other reasons that explain France's preference for economic sanctions. Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, France did not send military support to the Ukrainians in the lead-up to the invasion because Ukrainians were not expected to be able to resist a Russian invasion. Even in the case of Ukrainian resistance, arming Ukraine before the invasion could have led to further escalation. This would have

185 'Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices de 2019', Élysée, 27 August 2019, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1.

186 Interview 33

187 Interview 27

188 Interview 27

189 Interview 27

190 Interview 27

191 Interview 32

192 Interview 32

allowed Russia to believe France accepted conflict and it could have incentivised Russia to invade.[193] As related by another senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official: "*The little we could do to bolster Ukraine's defence would have a net negative effect by giving Putin the reasons or the rationale to more easily invade*."[194]

France's inclination not to antagonise Russia consequently oriented French responses towards de-escalation through economic sanctions and political dialogue, up to the final moments before the invasion. Because French officials did not expect a full-scale invasion, economic sanctions were seen as the instrument of choice to deter Putin. As stated by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official: "*We saw a lot of talk about economic damage and significant consequences and economic consequences but that military option was very much taken off the table*."[195]

After a series of phone calls, Macron and Putin finally met in Moscow on 7 February 2022. The press conference resulting from the meeting presented positive improvements towards a diplomatic resolution, even though no solution to the crisis was formally mentioned. On 20 February, Macron announced that he convinced Putin and Biden to meet to discuss viable security guarantees while respecting international law and precluding force.[196] Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, France's attempt to exhaust all diplomatic tools demonstrated its resolve to change the course of events. This endeavour, the senior official asserted, was not necessarily the result of incredulity about the possibility of war, but rather of the willingness to find a way out.[197]

5.4. Rationality through the French-looking Glass

Intelligence assessments during the lead-up to the crisis played an important role in France's overall threat assessment. When the US and the UK first shared their assessments with allies, French officials remained sceptical. The fallout from the US' intelligence failure, if not fabrication then manipulation of evidence of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction programme in 2003, continued to haunt its credibility in the eyes of European officials.[198] A high-ranking French military official elaborated on this mistrust which created doubts among French officials about US motives, believing "*that the US were trying to push us to something very aggressive*".[199] More specifically, the official explained that officials believed the US was "*telling us lies about the more precise intel that they had, that we were just blind about what the intent was*".[200] The US also stressed the imminency of the attack but could not share how the assessment was made. At the same time, according to a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, what US intelligence reported about troop deployments on the ground, was also recorded by

193 Interview 30

194 Interview 31

195 Interview 29

196 Staunton, 'A Useful Failure', 20.

197 Interview 30

198 Mark Phythian and David Strachan-Morris, 'Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 377–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2330132.

199 Interview 27

200 Interview 27

French military intelligence assessments: *"We have seen exactly the same thing including intelligence elements which were part of the analysis in Washington that it was serious."*[201] However, the French could not independently ascertain Russia's intent. This was related repeatedly over the course of our interviews. As shared by a high-ranking French military official: "*The assessment was a good one even if we didn't perceive the intent to invade.*"[202]

Alongside the disconcerting message delivered in US intelligence diplomacy, the Biden administration signalled that the US would not send American troops to Ukraine. In an interview with reporters, US President Biden mentioned that he would not send US combat troops to Ukraine but that: "*If in fact he [Putin] invades Ukraine, there will be severe consequences [...], economic consequences like ones he's never seen.*"[203] As related by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the US policy was twofold, signalling: "*We know that [the Russians are] gonna invade Ukraine, but we won't do anything militarily.*" According to the official, the US strategy was an "*inappropriate mix of options*".[204] This may have contributed to French officials downplaying the severity of the threat.

"There was probably a certain naivety on our part, [...] but I also think that some Russian diplomats genuinely believed that their country would not invade Ukraine, and at least on a large scale."

Furthermore, as added by multiple French officials, the growing Western interest in Asia and the Pacific had completely downplayed the Russia as a long-term threat to Europe.[205] Especially the US was preoccupied with Asia and more specifically, as stated by a high-ranking French military official: *"The US was more focused on what's going on in China."*[206] Another high-ranking French military official argued that Russia also witnessed this shift, arguing that: "*In the Russian mind, the United States was losing interest in Europe and was pivoting towards Asia and the Pacific. So, the US would therefore easily accept the Russian 'fait accompli.'"*[207] While the US and the UK tried to raise awareness among their European continental allies about the threat posed by Russia, French authorities focused on other factors which affected their assessment including the aforementioned historical ties between Russia and France and the diplomatic trust this fostered. As mentioned by the same official:

> "*We trusted also what the Russian authorities were telling us through diplomatic channels. There was probably a certain naivety on our part, [...] but I also think that some Russian diplomats genuinely believed that their country would not invade Ukraine, and at least on a large scale.*" [208]

There was an ongoing dialogue between the two countries in the context of the Minsk process which further shaped French thinking about the possibility of a large-scale war. As argued by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

> "*We were part of the very dire, tense, complicated discussion with the Ukrainians and Russians and we were probably much more focused on that track and trying to understand what Russia could do with a view to that process.*"[209]

201 Interview 29

202 Interview 33

203 John Wagner and Ashley Parker, 'Biden Says U.S. Ground Troops "Not on the Table" for Ukraine', *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-says-ground-troops-not-on-the-table-but-putin-would-face-severe-economic-sanctions-for-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/08/3b975d46-5843-11ec-9a18-a506cf3aa31d_story.html.

204 Interview 29

205 Interviews 4, 23, 27

206 Interview 27

207 Interview 23

208 Interview 23

209 Interview 29

The French military official previously quoted added: "*Ukrainian authorities themselves also said that they didn't believe in such a war, in such a large-scale invasion*."[210] Another factor that played a role was the notion for some officials that the size Russian forces was substantial but insufficient to invade, let alone occupy a country the size of Ukraine. A senior French Ministry of Defence official stated that they were not perceived as "*capable of taking Ukraine in a blitz-krieg of some sort. [...] So certainly they may have more limited territorial objectives*."[211] French intelligence had prioritised counterterrorism in Africa for a long time to the detriment of its ability to gain a good understanding of Russia. Consequently, when Russia deployed troops at the border with Ukraine, French services were not prepared to gather and analyse this type of intelligence, according to a high-ranking French military official.[212]

With regard to intelligence interpretation, French analyses thus diverged from the US and the UK assessments. While the US was explicit about the conflict's imminency, French intelligence assessed that troops were not ready for high-intensity conflict scenarios, as a high-ranking French military official related.[213] Another high-ranking French military official explained:

> "*It was difficult to assess if these troops would maintain their exercise all along the year or [...] if they would stop it after a few weeks. The French perception which was written in the intel reports, was that the options to invade would be very costly so we did not assess that these troops would be useful to invade the huge country of Ukraine. It would be really costly and very risky*."[214]

The French understanding was partly based on the assessment that the 2014 crisis proved to Russia that using large conventional forces was not the best option to achieve its objectives. Meanwhile, as shared by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Russia probably drew the opposite conclusion, that invading further would not necessarily trigger any concrete reaction from the West.[215] Furthermore, since 2014, NATO's eastern flank had been reinforced through increased troop presence and rotation. While these strategies signalled to Russia that NATO was ready to defend itself if it were to consider territories beyond Ukraine, they also indicated to Russia that NATO's posture would be strictly defensive. Here again, Russia's perspective was ignored.

New intelligence assessments from the US and the UK in January 2022 revealed critical capabilities required for credible military deployments and large-scale offensive operations. While intelligence assessments converged between allies, French authorities still did not fully grasp Putin's political intent. These new assessments fostered another understanding of the Russian force. As argued by a high-ranking French military official:

> "*If Russia decides to invade Ukraine, it would only take a few days to control the entire country. Because we thought that the military would use Western doctrines with huge strikes all over Ukraine and take control of Kyiv*." [216]

[210] Interview 23
[211] Interview 32
[212] Interview 27
[213] Interview 23
[214] Interview 33
[215] Interview 29
[216] Interview 33

This assessment contradicted previous ones which concluded that Russian forces were not ready for war. However, even if the Russian troops now seemed superior to Ukrainian troops, the assessment remained that war would be extremely costly for the Russians. The same official recalled: "*When we talk about February 2022, we still have the same perception that the war is costly for Putin [...] in terms of human resources and economy.*"[217]

Meanwhile, like other governments, the French assessment also did not take into account Ukraine's determination and ability to sustain a defence. As paraphrased by senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the general assessment was that Ukraine would not be able to resist a large-scale war.[218] As a result of these intelligence failures, military support to Ukraine in addition to economic sanctions was off the table. As a high-ranking French military official stated:

> "*We couldn't [...] anticipate the Ukrainian mindset and we couldn't understand how they would be so strong and resilient to resist. As we thought Russians would not have difficulties to control Ukraine, we didn't think about helping them by providing [...] weapons.*"[219]

5.5. **Conclusion**

Despite clear signs of an impending invasion, French policymakers were hesitant to recognise the scale of the threat and held varying assessments of its severity. On the one hand, the possibility of a Russian full-scale invasion was seen to be unfeasible because Russia was not seen as having the capabilities to conduct and/or sustain a full-scale invasion. On the other hand, after receiving more intelligence from their US and UK allies, a full-scale invasion seemed more plausible but was still deemed too costly for Russia. Even if Russian forces were perceived to be superior to the Ukrainians, French officials still did not perceive a large-scale and conventional war a viable option for Putin, because of the economic costs Russia would incur, and therefore concluded that a full-scale invasion was not likely. As a result, officials understood Russia's effort as limited to hybrid conflict or to a small territorial incursion. This overall impression led them to view Russia's deployment as part of signalling strategy.

In terms of response options, sending indirect and direct military aid to Ukraine was discussed but excluded from support options, as this was seen to potentially antagonise Russia while at the same time incentivising and legitimising a Russian invasion. This logic channelled French responses to diplomatic dialogue between the two presidents and the preparation of economic sanction packages. It also reflects a wider phenomenon in which European governments, whether unconsciously or not, dismissed the possibility of large-scale war scenarios until very late because of their undesirability. Instead, the focus remained on the costs that made the invasion deemed unlikely, leading officials to believe Putin would resort to grey-zone strategies. Overall, France's goal was to prevent any confrontation with Russia from happening to avoid and mitigate potential political and economic costs for all parties involved. As a result, the French reasoning was driven by the belief that diplomatic and economic means could resolve the crisis, impeding a fast military response and anticipation.

[217] Interview 33
[218] Interview 30
[219] Interview 33

6. A Friendship Betrayed: Germany

During the crisis, Germany's persistent efforts to deescalate tensions through diplomatic channels was rooted in its geographic location in *Mitteleuropa*, close economic ties to Russia, and inclination to maintain relations with Russia informed by its Ostpolitik. Germany continued to adhere to longstanding policies of *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade'). Combined with a pacifist streak in its foreign policies, it favoured dialogue with Russia until the final moment. Heavily dependent on Russian energy, the German leadership advocated for the peaceful resolution of the crisis, whilst failing to grasp the nature of Putin's expansionist ambitions.

This approach to the crisis presents Germany as a 'Dove' state, exemplified by Chancellor Olaf Scholz's statement: "*Putin did not threaten me or Germany*," implying that Russia was not an existential threat to Germany in the lead-up to the crisis.[220] German officials misinterpreted Russia's moves in the run-up to the invasion and ultimately failed to assess its imminency. Germany's response to the crisis was thereby limited to the signalling of its willingness to impose economic sanctions, while dismissing the possibility of military support upfront.

6.1. A German-Russian Love Story

In the period 1991-2014, Germany's approach towards Russia featured a consistent attempt to strengthen German-Russian relations, support democratic reform within Russia, and integrate it within a wider European security architecture, an approach informed by its own history of successful integration after the Second World War and the Cold War. Against the background of this triple ambition, successive German governments overlooked blatant infringements of the rule of law and criminalisation of the Russian economy, Germany's *Ostpolitik* prevailing.[221] Striving for peaceful coexistence, it elevated policies of *Wandel durch Annäherung* ('change through rapprochement') and *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade') to create cultural, political and economic links with Russia. These ties fostered interdependence, with the goal of promoting democracy and turning Russia into a "responsible stakeholder [...] in the international system."[222] In this process, Germany became very much dependent on Russia's considerable fossil fuel deposits. For instance, one-third of Germany's

220 Angelika Hellemann and Alexandra Würzbach, 'Olaf Scholz im BamS-Interview: Klimakleber? Viele schütteln den Kopf. Ich auch', Bild, 5 February 2023, https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/politik-inland/olaf-scholz-im-bams-interview-klimakleber-viele-schuetteln-den-kopf-ich-auch-82789486.bild.html.

221 John Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', in *Germany's Russia Problem: The Struggle for Balance in Europe* (Manchester University Press, 2021), 109–11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1rm25gx.8.

222 Hans Kundnani, 'Why Ostpolitik Is Needed Right Now', *International Politics and Society*, 11 July 2024, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/why-ostpolitik-is-needed-right-now-7645/.

energy imports came from Russia in 2011 and in 2020, as Germany was importing more than half of its natural gas from Russia.[223] Germany was also a key partner in the development of Nord Streams 1 and 2 while former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder took a well-paid position on the project's board after he left office.[224] During his time as chancellor, Schröder actively promoted closer ties with Russia, controversially describing Putin as a 'flawless democrat'.[225] Germany consistently sought to develop closer and deeper ties with Russia, pushing for its membership in the Council of Europe in 1996 and the G7 in 1997. In the 1990s, Chancellor Kohl also voiced his concerns about NATO's enlargement which could isolate Russia and exacerbate its feeling of humiliation.[226] In 1993, he particularly shared his doubts in a phone conversation with US President Clinton about the potential NATO memberships of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland and their impact on NATO-Russia relations.[227]

Vladimir Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich conference shocked German officials. German-Russian relationship continued to develop in the spirit of *Wandel durch Handel* policy, also under Chancellor Angela Merkel.[228] Merkel also advocated against Ukraine's accession to NATO in 2008, reasoning Russia would perceive it as a threat to its security interests. Meanwhile, Germany and Russia officially inaugurated the Nord Stream 1 pipeline in 2011 and started negotiating Nord Stream 2 in 2013.[229] The annexation of Crimea in 2014 exposed Putin's more offensive ambitions, also to German leaders who, if reluctantly, shifted course. Germany went along with the imposition of sanctions against Russia, while simultaneously keeping channels of communication open, seeking a negotiated settlement to the war in Eastern Ukraine together with France in the Normandy format, and refusing to send military support to Ukraine.[230]

"We were not so concerned with what was happening. We didn't imagine he [Putin] would go that far."

6.2. **Seeing is Not Believing**

The Russian deployment of forces along Ukraine's borders in April 2021 was largely downplayed by German officials. "*We were inclined to ignore it,*" shared a senior German official.[231] Germany did, however, ask Russia to remove its troops at the same time as the German Foreign Minister affirmed that stronger sanctions against Russia would not improve the escalating situation.[232] An official observed: "*We were not so concerned with what was happening.*

223 Stephen Szabo, '4. Doing Business with Russia Inc.', in *Germany, Russia, and the Rise of Geo-Economics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 62, http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/collections/monograph-detail; Christoph Halser and Florentina Paraschiv, 'Pathways to Overcoming Natural Gas Dependency on Russia—The German Case', *Energies* 15, no. 14 (2024): 1, https://doi.org/10.3390/en15144939.

224 Sylvie Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés: Comment Berlin et Paris Ont Laissé La Voie Libre à La Russie*, Stock (2023), 133; Szabo, '4. Doing Business with Russia Inc.', 71.

225 Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', 132; Angela Stent, 'Germany and Russia: Farewell to Ostpolitik?', *Survival* 64, no. 5 (2022): 30, 31, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2126194.

226 Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', 115, 117, 118.

227 Stephan Kieninger, 'The Helmut Kohl Transcripts: NATO Enlargement', Wilson Center, 26 February 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/helmut-kohl-transcripts-nato-enlargement.

228 Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés*, 35-36.

229 Lough, '4. A Failure to Read Russia Correctly', 143; Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés*, 140.

230 Stent, 'Germany and Russia', 31; Marco Siddi, '7. Germany's Evolving Relationship with Russia: Towards a Norm- Based Ostpolitik?', in *Europe's New Political Engine: Germany's Role in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2016), 160–61, https://www.academia.edu/24281656/Germanys_evolving_relationship_with_Russia_Towards_a_norm_based_Ostpolitik. ; Siddi, 'Germany's Evolving Relationship with Russia', 157, 167.

231 Interview 43

232 'Germany Urges Russia to Reduce Troops near Ukraine', Deutsche Welle (DW), 8 April 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/germany-urges-russia-to-reduce-troop-presence-near-ukraine/a-57134905; 'Germany's Maas Opposes Tougher Russia Sanctions', Deutsche Welle (DW), 26 April 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-heiko-maas-opposes-tougher-russia-sanctions/a-57331505.

We didn't imagine he [Putin] would go that far." [233] In the perceptions of these policymakers, Russia's buildup was part of a broader campaign of signalling its intent rather than preparing for crisis escalation.

Putin's subsequent July essay was similarly seen as part and parcel of the usual Russian repertoire. Paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the essay reflected Putin's usual *modus operandi* rather than signalling an intent to go to war.[234] "*We thought it was historical nonsense,*" added the senior German official.[235] The same day as the publication, German and Ukrainian leaders met to discuss Nord Stream 2 and underlined the need to address Ukraine's energy security in the Normandy Format negotiations.[236] "*At the time of the essay, we were still very much busy with the Minsk process. We tried to create a meeting of the Normandy format with the leaders present,*" stated the senior German official previously quoted.[237] As a result, Germany's focus on the Minsk Agreements and its existing economic ties with Russia, led German officials to believe that Putin was acting in the context of these agreements. Paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, war was not part of the German mindset and was thereby seen to be implausible.[238] The official also argued that this was partly due to the fact that there was a widespread belief Germany needed to coexist with Russia. While the prospect of war seemed unimaginable to German officials, Germany was conscious of the potential leverage Nord Stream would provide Russia. This is why, in July 2021, Germany signed an agreement with the US to impede any potential attempt by the Russians to weaponise energy through the pipeline against Ukraine and Central and Eastern European countries.[239] By September 2021, the construction of Nord Stream 2 was finished and in October, the German Economy Ministry declared that the pipeline would not constitute a threat to energy security, serving as a preliminary condition to complete the pipeline certification by the German authorities.[240]

Putin's second troop buildup stirred greater concern. This time, "*It was taken seriously*," mentioned a senior German official. German officials struggled but tried to understand Putin's intentions by comparing the buildup to previous events such as the July essay and the Munich speech which, as related by the senior German official, "*was seen as very problematic*".[241] Still, as stated by the same official: "*The dominating sense [was] that he [Putin] wouldn't go that far.*"[242] A few days before starting his term in December 2021, incoming Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced that any threat to Ukraine "*would be an unacceptable situation*".[243] He emphasised that states' sovereign borders were to be respected while emphasising the need to maintain dialogue. German concerns were expressed again at the end of December during

233 Interview 43

234 Interview 14

235 Interview 43

236 'Merkel Reassures Ukraine on Gas Transit after Nord Stream 2', Deutsche Welle (DW), 12 July 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/nord-stream-2-angela-merkel-reassures-ukraine-on-gas-transit/a-58235808.

237 Interview 43

238 Interview 14

239 Simon Lewis and Andrea Shalal, 'U.S., Germany Strike Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Deal to Push Back on Russian "Aggression"', Energy, *Reuters*, 21 July 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-germany-deal-nord-stream-2-pipeline-draws-ire-lawmakers-both-countries-2021-07-21/.

240 Joseph Nasr and Christoph Steitz, 'Certifying Nord Stream 2 Poses No Threat to Gas Supply to EU -Germany', Reuters, 26 October 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/certifying-nord-stream-2-is-no-threat-gas-supply-eu-german-ministry-2021-10-26/; *Russia's Nord Stream 2 Natural Gas Pipeline to Germany Halted*, legislation (Congressional Research Service, 2022), 1, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11138.

241 Interview 43

242 Interview 43

243 'Germany's Scholz Says Any Threat to Ukraine Unacceptable', Europe, *Reuters*, 7 December 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-parties-sign-new-start-coalition-deal-before-handover-power-2021-12-07/.

a press conference, where the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called on Russia to use the Normandy format to negotiate de-escalation.[244]

Yet, Putin continued to be perceived as unlikely to jeopardise the post-Second World War order, instead German officials viewed the military buildup as an act of coercion. "*You never pull that number of troops together without intentions. We saw it as coercion and pressuring,*" claimed the senior German official.[245] A full-scale invasion still continued to seem unfathomable in the eyes of decision-makers and their advisors. They applied their own notions of rationality onto Putin's thinking about Russia's interests and on that basis concluded that he would not invade, as the costs would be too high. As the senior German official observed: "*Everyone said it looks like he is going to attack but he has to be crazy to do it*." [246]

6.3. **The Legacy of *Ostpolitik***

"Everyone said it looks like he is going to attack but he has to be crazy to do it."

From December 2021 onwards, the US and the UK started sharing alarming intelligence elements revealing Putin's intentions to launch an invasion. German officials were sceptical, remembering the 2003 Iraq intelligence mistake which hampered trust in US intelligence. In line with its pacifist inclination, the German intelligence services and the political leadership interpreted the intelligence differently than the US and insisted on avoiding crisis escalation through open dialogue. When the US and the UK doubled down on their intelligence diplomacy, warning for the attack's imminency, it did affect the German debate behind the scenes at least to some extent. The senior German official observed that the Germans "*shifted to making a few preparations in case things went awry,*" but that "*Preparations were mostly on the economic front.*"[247] This was captured by German Minister of Economic Affairs Robert Habeck's statement: "*Russia knows that crossing red lines would immediately trigger painful sanctions that have already been prepared*."[248] He would later go on to reflect on this period, concluding that the West had been overly naive in the months leading up to the conflict, calling for a change in the predominantly pacifist culture in Germany and Europe as a whole.[249] Close business ties with Russia played a role too, however. The senior German official mentioned that: "*There was a very strong economic lobby [...] in the industry sector, especially on gas. Preparations on Nord Stream were underway*."[250] This pressure from the economic sector may have further prompted a climate in which German officials dismissed the possibility of a full-scale invasion scenario which would impose enormous costs on the German economy.

While Germany believed these extensive trade relations in combination with diplomacy would prevent an attack on Ukraine, the situation deteriorated further. German Foreign Minister Baerbock visited Kyiv in January 2022 and stated that any Russian attack "*would have a high*

244 'Rede der Bundesministerin des Auswärtigen, Annalena Baerbock', Federal Government - Bundesregierung, 23 December 2021, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-der-bundesministerin-des-auswaertigen-annalena-baerbock--1993872.

245 Interview 43

246 Interview 43

247 Interview 43

248 'Robert Habeck: "Russia Knows That Crossing Red Lines Would Immediately Trigger Painful Sanctions" - DER SPIEGEL', accessed 4 April 2025, https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-economy-minister-robert-habeck-russia-knows-that-crossing-red-lines-would-immediately-trigger-painful-sanctions-a-907de5d5-f0d6-41a1-ae4d-89c997d46434.

249 'Germany and Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine: The Third Year | DGAP', accessed 4 April 2025, https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/germany-and-russias-war-aggression-against-ukraine-third-year.

250 Interview 43

price", signalling Germany's willingness to impose sanctions on Russia *after* it would launch an attack.[251] Preventive sanctions, something Ukraine asked for, were not part of the punishment. As explained by the senior German official, the German government "*did not feel it was necessary to impose sanctions ahead of an attack*".[252] Furthermore, robust military support was not on the table. Initially, the German government announced it would not even send protective military equipment, although it later dispatched 5,000 helmets to Ukraine on 2 January 2022.[253] "*We don't provide any lethal weapons,*" Chancellor Scholz still insisted in an interview at the end of January.[254] The German government vetoed Ukraine's purchase of NATO anti-drone rifles and anti-sniper systems and delayed its approval to send Estonian German-made howitzers.[255] Germany's reticence rooted in the legacy of the Second World War was codified by a policy commitment not to send weapons to war zones.[256] As the senior German official observed: "*It was not in our DNA to send anything militarily.*" [257] Paraphrasing another senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, this German pacifist mindset more broadly explains why no clearer deterrent threats were communicated in the months leading up to the invasion.[258] Moreover, as the social democrats' spokesman Nils Schmidt added in January 2022: "*France and Germany are mediators and I think it's not very appropriate for a mediator nation to send weapons to Ukraine, to one conflict party, because we are trying to promote a diplomatic solution*."[259]

On 26 January, France hosted a meeting within the Normandy format, gathering parties for the first time since the last meeting in 2019. The meeting was received positively by Ukraine's Head of the President's Office, Yermak, characterising it as the "*reanimation of the Normandy format*".[260] The joint *communiqué* published at the end of the meeting expressed the parties' willingness to overcome differences in opinion through dialogue even if to some observers the results of the meeting largely favoured Russia as Ukraine was the only party making concessions.[261]

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251 'Foreign Minister Baerbock in Kyiv and Moscow', Federal Government - Bundesregierung, 18 January 2022, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/baerbock-ukraine-russia-1998934.

252 Interview 43

253 David M. Herszenhorn et al., 'Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid', POLITICO, 26 February 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-russia-germany-still-blocking-arms-supplies/.

254 Frank Jordans, 'German Caution on Arms to Ukraine Rooted in History, Energy', Associated Press, 25 January 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-germany-estonia-europe-6355dfe-b69a3793d1a1a040e4d23b6c1.

255 Roman Olearchyk and Ben Hall, 'Ukraine Blames Germany for "Blocking" Nato Weapons Supply', *Financial Times* (London), 12 December 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/1336c9be-f1c9-4545-9f85-3b07fcb746d6; Herszenhorn et al., 'Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid'.

256 Herszenhorn et al., 'Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid'; Jordans, 'German Caution on Arms to Ukraine Rooted in History, Energy'.

257 Interview 43

258 Interview 14

259 Jenny Hill, *Why Germany Isn't Sending Weapons to Ukraine*, 28 January 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60155002.

260 Yuliia Rudenko, 'Normandy Talks for Ukraine-Russia Conflict Resolution Resumed. Why Was It a Win for Russia?', Euromaidan Press, 27 January 2022, https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/01/27/normandy-talks-for-ukraine-russia-conflict-resolution-resumed-why-was-it-a-win-for-russia/.

261 Yuliia Rudenko, 'Normandy Talks for Ukraine-Russia Conflict Resolution Resumed. Why Was It a Win for Russia?', Euromaidan Press, 27 January 2022, https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/01/27/normandy-talks-for-ukraine-russia-conflict-resolution-resumed-why-was-it-a-win-for-russia/.

6.4. **Caught Off Guard**

During the final weeks prior to the onset of the war, Germany continued to try and de-escalate the crisis through diplomatic dialogue and the threat of sanctions. On 12 February 2022, representatives from Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia met in Berlin for what would become the last Normandy meeting. Parties agreed to renew the work of the Trilateral Contact Group involving Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE regarding a potential diplomatic resolution for the Donbas conflict. Other than this step, no significant progress was made after a difficult nine-hour discussion, and representatives failed to agree on a joint *communiqué*.[262] In this climate of growing tensions, the German Chancellor visited Kyiv on 14 February announcing support for Ukraine through the continuation of financial support.[263] The Chancellor visited Moscow the next day where he discussed the Russian deployments at the Ukrainian border and expressed his concerns. As one German official related, Scholz also met with Russian think tankers in an attempt to understand Putin's intentions–to no avail.[264] Chancellor Scholz stated that Germany "cannot see any sound reason for this buildup of troops" and called for responsible action from all parties to prevent war from returning in Europe.[265] "For my generation, war in Europe is now inconceivable – and we must ensure that it stays that way," the chancellor added.[266]

Germany's approach was more of a "dissuasive policy towards Russia and not really deterrent".

After his Moscow visit, the German chancellor believed he had received assurances that the troops would be withdrawn. As the senior German official observed: "*The Russians have everything in place for an invasion. But the question is: how do you interpret this information? The US and UK assume he's going to act. But we see it slightly differently.*"[267] On the basis of this impression, Chancellor Scholz felt vindicated to further pursue a diplomatic route.[268] The US, however, pointed to the presence of a considerable number of Russian troops on the border.[269]

NATO allies, including Germany, were predominantly concerned with the security of NATO territory, even though some felt that NATO territory itself was not under immediate threat. As the senior German official explained: "*NATO was not directly affected. At the time there was simply a difference. Would Germany defend Poland? Yes. And Ukraine? No, because that is a different story.*"[270] *Vis-à-vis* Ukraine, however, Germany's approach was more of "*a dissuasive policy towards Russia and not really deterrent.*"[271] The German government continued to focus on diplomacy, also in these final weeks, clearly captured in the chancellor's statement while

[262] Yuliia Rudenko, 'No Progress in Normandy Talks around Russia-Ukraine Conflict in Donbas', Euromaidan Press, 11 February 2022, https://euromaidanpress.com/2022/02/11/no-progress-in-berlin-talks-around-russia-ukraine-conflict-in-donbas-normandy-format/.

[263] 'Federal Chancellor Scholz in Kyiv: Germany Stands Side by Side with Ukraine', The Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 14 February 2022, https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-en/news/federal-chancellor-scholz-ukraine-2005438.

[264] Interview 43

[265] 'Federal Chancellor Scholz in Moscow: Courageous Action Is the Order of the Day', The Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, 15 February 2022, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/federal-chancellor-scholz-moscow-2005774.

[266] Fed. Chancell. Fed. Repub. Ger., 'Federal Chancellor Scholz in Moscow'.

[267] Phythian and Strachan-Morris, 'Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War'.

[268] Steve Rosenberg, *Ukraine-Russia Tensions: Russia Pulls Some Troops Back from Border*, 15 February 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60386141.

[269] Alexander Smith, 'U.S. Says Russia Lied about Pullback from near Ukraine, Is Sending in More Troops', NBC News, 17 February 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ukraine-crisis-russia-troop-pullback-met-skepticism-west-ukraine-defia-rcna16435.

[270] Interview 43

[271] Interview 43

in Moscow: "*For us Germans–and indeed for all Europeans–it is clear that sustainable security cannot be achieved against Russia, only with Russia*."[272] Despite distrust in US intelligence and Germany's resolve to find a diplomatic solution, the continued intelligence diplomacy on the part of the Five Eyes members raised some results, putting the German government on higher alert. The senior German official stated: *"The 10% doubt that was there did not stop us from preparing. On 21 February, we prepared a statement for a rogue scenario. [...] It's not that we completely ignored everything.*"[273] The next day, with a very large Russian invasion force amassed along Ukraine's borders, the German government finally halted the Nord Stream 2 certification process. Still then, the decision was heavily contested in the German political and business communities.[274] "*We were very aware of how this instrument could work even though that didn't hold him [Putin] back,*" the official explained, even if the Scholz government was more critical and willing than its predecessor to play the Nord Stream card to pressure Putin.[275] Despite these last-minute German efforts, Putin invaded Ukraine. A few days later, Chancellor Scholz would officially change Germany's posture *vis-à-vis* Russia and frame its support to Ukraine in his famous *Zeitenwende* (watershed) speech.[276]

"It is clear that sustainable security cannot be achieved against Russia, only with Russia."

German Chief of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND) Bruno Kahl, as well as many other senior German policymakers, did not see the Russian invasion coming. Bruno Kahl, for example, was caught in Kiev when the war broke out and had to be evacuated by Special Forces.[277] Despite this, he would go on to tell parliament eight months later that the BND had been warning Putin would "achieve his political goals" using force if necessary. [278] Despite his claims to parliament, he was reported to have told CIA director William Burns that an invasion was "not going to happen".[279]

6.5. **Conclusion**

The German government's response in the lead-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was characterised by disbelief in the likelihood of full-scale war. German policymakers remained convinced that dependency and dialogue would suffice to rein in Russian aggression. This *Weltanschauung* blinded them to the mounting signs of an impending invasion. The core assumption that Putin's actions were limited to coercive diplomacy rather than large-scale war led to a reactive and cautious stance. Intelligence warnings from the US and the UK were initially met with scepticism. Instead, the German government put more trust in its own assessments and mediation role, further reinforcing its reluctance to take preventative military or economic measures, out of fear of further aggravating the situation. While Germany eventually aligned itself with NATO and EU allies in supporting Ukraine after the invasion, its

272 Fed. Chancell. Fed. Repub. Ger., 'Federal Chancellor Scholz in Moscow'.

273 Interview 43

274 Kauffmann, *Les Aveuglés*, 122.

275 Interview 43

276 'Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin', Federal Government - Bundesregierung, 27 February 2022, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378.

277 'Special Forces Evacuated German Spy Chief from Ukraine -Focus Magazine', Europe, *Reuters*, 25 February 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/special-forces-evacuated-german-spy-chief-ukraine-focus-magazine-2022-02-25/.

278 'Ukraine-Krieg: Zäsur für Geheimdienste', Deutsche Welle (DW), 17 October 2022, https://www.dw.com/de/ukraine-krieg-z%C3%A4sur-f%C3%BCr-geheimdienste/a-63464194.

279 Franklin Foer, *The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden's White House and the Struggle for America's Future*, Eerste editie (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), 553.

pre-war miscalculations exemplify how officials deeply believed Putin would act according to their own notion of rationality: large-scale war on the European continent was therefore simply seen as an irrational prospect. These misjudgements resulted in Germany being caught off guard when diplomacy failed. The invasion of Ukraine forced a dramatic shift in German policy, culminating in Chancellor Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, which signalled a fundamental re-evaluation of Germany's defence posture and its role in European security. This turning point highlights how the crisis ultimately shattered long-held assumptions about Russia, resulting in a more assertive and security-oriented German foreign policy moving forward.

7. Reluctant to Confront Reality: The Netherlands

At the onset of the crisis, the relationship between the Netherlands and Russia was already strained first through Russia's annexation of Crimea followed by the downing of flight MH17 in 2014 and Russia's subsequent refusal to admit involvement of Russian agents and to handover those responsible, and its active effort to undermine the investigation of the Dutch authorities into the event. In this context, the Dutch government expressed concern about Russia's military buildup in April 2021 but continued to support diplomatic solutions through the Normandy Format with additional sanctions seen only as an instrument of last resort. Public opinion echoed this ambivalence with public figures sowing doubt over the likelihood of Russian aggression.[280] Similar to France and Germany, senior policymakers considered a potential large-scale war in Ukraine to be unlikely. A deeply entrenched peacetime mindset led many of them to dismiss Russian actions as routine provocations rather than as precursors to a full-scale invasion. As such, the Netherlands acted as a non-existentially threatened 'Dove' state that did not provide military support to Ukraine in the months leading up to its invasion. The Dutch government's eventual shift in early 2022, marked by the announcement of sanctions and military aid, reflected a growing alignment with the Five Eyes Community, Poland and the Baltic states, a shift that came only days before Russia invaded.

7.1. A Strained Relationship

In the years leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, three issues dominated the bilateral relationship between the Netherlands and Russia. The first significant event following less than half a year after the annexation of Crimea was the downing of passenger flight MH17 over the Donetsk Oblast in July 2014. The fateful attack resulted in the death of 298 passengers including 196 Dutch nationals, representing one of the biggest losses of life for the Netherlands in recent memory.[281] As a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official put it: "*The downing of MH17 was a real low point... This was like a wake-up call.*"[282] Russia's subsequent obstruction and refusal to cooperate with the Dutch investigation team aggravated the Dutch government.[283] In addition, Russia categorically dismissed the team's findings as "fiction", refused to hand-over those responsible to stand trial, and did not offer any compensation to the families of the deceased.[284] Amid the strained relationship resulting from MH17,

280 *Waarom Poetin Oekraïne Niet Aanvalt*, directed by Maarten van Rossem - De Podcast, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf5XHNa3Qcl.

281 Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 'MH17 Incident - Government.Nl', onderwerp, Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 23 January 2018, https://www.government.nl/topics/mh17-incident.

282 Interview 7

283 Dickinson, 'Putin's New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions'.

284 Stephanie van den Berg, 'Russia Calls Ukraine's MH17 Accusations at World Court "Fiction"', Europe, *Reuters*, 14 June 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-calls-ukraines-mh17-accusations-world-court-fiction-2023-06-14/.

a series of high-profile incidents further fuelled Dutch concerns, which cemented, as a former senior Dutch official observed, Russia's status as a "*spoiler*."[285] These incidents where not unheard of going back to the Cold War. The following are known examples from recent years. One such incident took place in response to the Russian diplomat Dmitri Borodin being arrested in The Hague for the possible abuse of his children.[286] Just 10 days later, Dutch diplomat Onno Elderenbosch was attacked in his Moscow flat.[287] As the former senior Dutch official previously quoted recalled: "*So that was uncomfortable. And the second man from the embassy was beaten up. Many unpleasant things happened*."[288] Another incident was the 2018 attempted Russian cyber-operation against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), based in The Hague, by Russian agents present on the ground.[289] This prompted the government to arrest and extradite the Russian agents and publicly attribute the action in a press conference.[290] Similarly, the Netherlands expelled two Russian spies in 2020 after uncovering an espionage network.[291] Finally, the Netherlands, like Germany, came to increasingly rely on Russian gas, after the partial closure of the Groningen gas fields in 2018. As one expert stated: "*With gas, we knew: when the Groningen field is empty, we can only buy gas from Russia and Norway.*"[292] Underlying this need was the hope that mutual dependence on the lucrative gas trade would ensure peace, inhibiting forceful responses.

"With gas, we knew: when the Groningen field is empty, we can only buy gas from Russia and Norway."

7.2. The Lead-up: Deterrence and Dialogue

Russia's initial military buildup in April 2021 was characterised in Dutch media as the deliberate flexing of Russian military muscle, with the goal to intimidate both NATO and Ukraine.[293] Rob Bauer, incoming Chair of NATO's military committee, publicly described the troop buildup as a "clear message" from Russia, highlighting the need for greater investments in the Dutch armed forces.[294] Dutch policymakers, however, predominantly interpreted the buildup as posturing rather than as a precursor to invasion. Paraphrasing a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, this was all about signalling for the United States, and the Russians wanted to be taken seriously.[295] The official added that since the Covid pandemic, the Russians had become more isolated, which made them harder to engage with in conversation. The Dutch government's immediate response that April was a statement expressing support by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok: "In short, it is in the Dutch, European and

285 Interview 41

286 'Dutch Apologize to Russia over Diplomat's Arrest', AP News, 9 October 2013, https://apnews.com/general-news-71ad58fe01c042c284a62cecf0fff5ea.

287 Tom Balmforth, 'Attack on Diplomat in Moscow Deepens Dutch-Russian Rift', World News, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/16/moscow-assault-dutch-diplomat.

288 Interview 41

289 Ministerie van Defensie, 'Russian Cyber Operation Disrupted - Cyber Security - Defensie.NI', onderwerp, Ministerie van Defensie, 4 October 2018, https://english.defensie.nl/topics/cyber-security/russian-cyber-operation.

290 'Dutch Authorities Brief World Chemical Weapons Watchdog on Alleged Russian Cyber Attack | UN News', 4 October 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1022262.

291 'AIVD ontmaskert twee Russische diplomaten als spionnen', 10 December 2020, https://nos.nl/artikel/2360085-aivd-ontmaskert-twee-russische-diplomaten-als-spionnen.

292 Tom-Jan Meeus, 'Hoe Nederland de gasmarkt aan Poetin uitleverde', *NRC*, 21 October 2022, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/10/21/hoe-nederland-de-gasmarkt-aan-poetin-uitleverde-2-a4145779.

293 'NAVO-chef waarschuwt Rusland: stop met troepenopbouw aan grens Oekraïne', 13 April 2021, https://nos.nl/artikel/2376564-navo-chef-waarschuwt-rusland-stop-met-troepenopbouw-aan-grens-oekraine.

294 Harm van Atteveld, 'Commandant Der Strijdkrachten over de Erbarmelijke Staat van Ons Leger: "Dit Is Niet Uit Te Leggen"', 1V Een Vandaag, 2 April 2021, https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/artikelen/commandant-der-strijdkrachten-over-de-erbarmelijke-staat-van-ons-leger-dit-is-niet-uit-te-leggen-127951.

295 Interview 6

NATO interest to simultaneously send a very clear message to the Russian Federation that the autonomy of Ukraine must be respected."[296] A few months later, after the NATO Summit on 28 June, then Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigrid Kaag, when asked what the agreed upon course of action would be, stated:

> *"We always seek dialogue where possible, but there are limits. We naturally also look for the opportunity to discuss safety and confidence-building measures, if only to be able to avoid the risk of misunderstanding and thus escalation."*[297]

This course of action sparked little discussion. Then parliament member, and current Minister of Defence, Ruben Brekelmans captured this "support [for] the two-track approach of deterrence and dialogue".[298]

Putin's summer essay on the unity between Russia and Ukraine did not trigger widespread concern among Dutch policymakers. It was largely dismissed as another rhetorical feat meant for internal consumption, rather than a genuine threat, as one senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official observed.[299] A senior Dutch military official at the time regarded the essay as an attempt "*more to explain history and also Russian thinking about, well, about Ukraine in more generic terms*."[300] Another senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official stated: "*Actually, I don't think it changed much because it doesn't fit into the more rationalist think frame that many have here. It's an imperialist way of thinking which is not maintained*."[301] As a result, Russian expansionist ambitions were not taken seriously. Dutch policymakers regarded the essay not as a precursor to anything, but rather as a means to reiterate Russia's view on Ukrainian sovereignty without any material implications.

7.3. **Doubts and Duality**

The Dutch parliament was regularly briefed on the government's responses to the escalating situation. During a session on 15 September, Prime Minister Mark Rutte defended his government's approach, emphasising that efforts were made to prevent further Russian aggression:

> *"If we had a solution to that [Russia-Ukraine], we would do it. I think the whole mix of measures, the sanctions, the people-to-people contacts and the pressure-and-dialogue approach that we have is really the only way."*[302]

Russia's second significant troop buildup from October onwards followed by its *démarches* presented in mid-December did, however, raise more concern both among Dutch diplomats

296 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'Raad Algemene Zaken en Raad Buitenlandse Zaken; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 15 april 2021, over Raad Buitenlandse Zaken NB gewijzigd tijdstip', officiële publicatie, 29 April 2021, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-21501-02-2322.html, 18.

297 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'NAVO; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 7 juni 2021, over de NAVO Top', officiële publicatie, 25 June 2021, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28676-370.html, 11.

298 Staten-Generaal, 3.

299 Interview 34

300 Interview 10

301 Interview 7

302 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'Europese top van 24-25 juni 2021', officiële publicatie, 22 June 2021, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20202021-91-37.html.

in Brussels and in The Hague. Still, as one senior Dutch military official observed: "*These things were reported, briefly discussed. Unfortunately, these discussions were not very deep.*"[303] The increased concern was apparent and reflected in a statement by the newly appointed Foreign Minister Ben Knapen in mid-December:

> *"In short, we see this troop buildup in Russia as extremely worrying. I repeat: extremely worrisome. It is something that we have to keep a close eye on and where we will possibly have to send signals that we consider it worrying. Of course, the European Union can always decide at some point to come forward with what is within its means, think of specific sanction packages. It was also Ukraine's request to do so last week."*[304]

Despite the minister's acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation, he stopped short of announcing any concrete robust measures. This hesitation appeared to stem from the absence of a clear mandate or consensus on such options at the time. While more forceful responses may have been considered, they were ultimately deferred to discussions within the broader EU framework, consistent with the Dutch foreign policy tradition of acting in concert with European and Transatlantic partners. In conjunction with a reluctance to recognise the possibility of large-scale conventional war, a preference for a soft approach aimed at avoiding confrontation persisted for much of the pre-full-scale invasion period, in line with the positions of Germany and France. For example, according to a senior Dutch official, experts on the Dutch Russia Desk at the Dutch Foreign Ministry reported higher up in the decision-making chain that "*The intelligence services' assessment was that the threat was a threat but, would not materialise into an actual Russian attack.*"[305] The likelihood of a full-scale invasion was, in spite of mounting signs, still seen as neither rational nor politically palatable. As one former senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official aptly observed:

"The intelligence services' assessment was that the threat was a threat but, would not materialise into an actual Russian attack."

> *"We thought in terms of soft power. And not in terms of hard power. We were thinking in terms of a larger single market. Of legislation and regulation. Of more trade. Of more cooperation. And Russia actually never abandoned thinking in terms of power. Only we didn't see that."*[306]

Meanwhile as the crisis developed, the Netherlands remained committed to getting Russia to back down through the threat of sanctions.[307]

7.4. **Caution Persists**

Russia's December *démarches* did stir some concern among Dutch policymakers, but reluctance to adopt a more forceful stance persisted. The Dutch government's discomfort and fear of escalation, was visibly at display reflected in Dutch Foreign Minister Knapen's statement a few weeks later on 5 January 2022:

303 Interview 10

304 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'NAVO; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 24 november 2021, over NAVO/OVSE', officiële publicatie, 14 December 2021, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28676-381.html.

305 Interview 42

306 Interview 41

307 'Introductiedossier Buitenlandse Zaken' (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, December 2021), https://www.qracao.com/docs/Introductiedossier+ministerie+van+BZ.pdf

> *"At this stage, I would like to stay away publicly from what exactly is sensible and what is not. This is also a subject that calls for a certain amount of subtlety and nuance, because on the one hand, you want to make it clear that there are limits somewhere and, on the other hand, you don't want to do anything that in itself promotes escalation."*[308]

Questions concerning Russia's intentions now came to be more widely debated among senior policymakers, yet the Netherlands remained on the fence. As a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official related:

> "*I personally didn't think we should agree to it [Russia's demands] based on those Russian proposals... It seemed like a tactic to give credibility to their demands while Russia demanded to be viewed as a superpower*."[309]

Priority was put on ensuring a unified front with NATO allies coordinating their responses in the lead-up to the 26 January convening at NATO to formulate a written response to Russia's demands, rejecting them publicly.[310] Public opinion mirrored this caution and indecision. The same month, a survey found that 81% of Dutch respondents expressed worry about Russian aggression, second only to Georgian respondents.[311] However, when economic concerns were added to the questioning, respondents expressed tempered resolve to respond forcefully, even if only on the economic front. For example, when asked if the Netherlands should import more gas to lower energy prices at the risk of increased dependence on Russia, respondents were nearly split evenly, with 41% opposing and 39% supporting the idea. While these figures underscore concern among significant parts of society, they also highlight a reluctance to endure any economic sacrifice. Rather than being entirely out of sync with public sentiment, government policies, such as preparing sanctions without committing to major defence spending increases, reflected a delicate balancing act within a divided coalition and a public with mixed views. Drawing lessons from this account, one official emphasised the importance of sharing intelligence to build public support:

> "*That means we have to be much more open about what we see. I think that's a very important lesson. Because that creates more support. And therefore, more options for action or more opportunities to do something as well*."[312]

7.5. **Coming to Terms with Reality**

By late January 2022, the Dutch government's position regarding the threat posed by Russia remained close to the French and German positions. A few days after the NATO-Russia Council meeting on 12 January, yet another new Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra clung on to the commitment to finding a diplomatic solution. As related by a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

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308 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'Raad Algemene Zaken en Raad Buitenlandse Zaken; Verslag van een commissiedebat; Verslag van een commissiedebat, gehouden op 7 december 2021, over Raad Buitenlandse Zaken', officiële publicatie, 22 December 2021, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-21501-02-2439.html.

309 Interview 42

310 NATO, 'NATO Conveys Written Proposals to Russia', NATO, accessed 13 March 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_191252.htm.

311 'Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century', Fondapol, accessed 20 February 2025, https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century/.

312 Interview 42

> "*In addition to strengthening deterrence in case of further Russian aggression against Ukraine, the government considers de-escalation, transparency and dialogue important to stabilise relations between Russia and Ukraine.*"[313]

This statement essentially mirrors the one of his pre-predecessor Sigrid Kaag from June the previous year. At face value it indicates little significant change in the Dutch approach. A pervasive sense of disbelief dominated, as key policymakers within the Dutch government grappled with the escalating Russian aggression and the possibility of large-scale war. This sentiment is encapsulated in one former Dutch official's reflection: *"We couldn't imagine them going any further. They fiddle with the boundaries, yes. And that's annoying, but that's not a war."*[314] Similarly, another senior Dutch military official admitted to being sceptical about the possibility of war: *"And I believed until the very last moment that he [Putin] would not take the risk. But he did."*[315] Such cognitive dissonance was more widespread, with Russian military posturing and inflammatory rhetoric being dismissed as routine provocation rather than indicators of impending conflict. As related by one high-ranking Dutch military official: *"It's very difficult. I think, in general. If it doesn't fit into your world, then it's very difficult to take certain indications very seriously."*[316]

"We couldn't imagine them going any further. They fiddle with the boundaries, yes. And that's annoying, but that's not a war."

This disbelief was the product of many decades of peace in Western Europe which had conditioned policymakers to view war as an inconceivable outcome. One former senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official noted: *"For so long in the West [...] we have lived in such relative peace on our continent. It was just beyond imagination that anyone would be so stupid."*[317] Another senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official added: *"Our assessment at that time was not [that Putin would use force], and also that buildup did not lead to that understanding."*[318] In policy discussions about robust deterrent responses, potential risks associated with unwanted escalation induced caution. For example, there was a debate on whether or not to send sniper rifles to Ukraine. As related by the same senior Dutch official:

> "*I know that until fairly recently before the invasion, we had an internal discussion, which in retrospect seems very surreal, about whether sniper rifles were offensive or defensive weapons... So there was already discussion about whether this leads to escalation or de-escalation/deterrence?*"[319]

These unfavourable realities meant that policymakers held off from making any big commitments until the situation necessitated it. Illustrative of the lack of urgency also present in other capitals, a senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official recalls the last week before the invasion: "*But when I left, let's put it this way, I went on holiday. With the idea that it is possible, but it could also take months or it might not happen at all.*"[320]

This measured stance was evident in Prime Minister Mark Rutte's public statements. His remarks consistently avoided endorsing more assertive options and instead emphasised

313 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'NAVO; Brief regering; Verslag van de NAVO ministeriële bijeenkomst van 7 januari 2022', officiële publicatie, 14 January 2022, https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-28676-385.html.

314 Interview 41

315 Interview 10

316 Interview 11

317 Interview 41

318 Interview 15

319 Interview 15

320 Interview 15

diplomatic solutions, while explicitly rejecting more forceful responses. At the time, public and parliamentary debate largely focused on whether to send troops or weapons, neither of which the Netherlands committed to. On 21 January 2022, Rutte called the idea of sending troops to Ukraine "out of the question".[321] By 2 February, as tensions escalated, he reiterated that "anything to avoid war" was the priority, while describing the issue of sending weapons as a "very sensitive issue and it has to be very precise".[322] The Dutch government's position started shifting in the days leading up to the invasion, reflecting a broader reassessment of security priorities. However, after February 2022, there was a shift in their approach. On 18 February 2022, the Dutch government finally did adapt its approach as it committed to send:

> *"3,000 combat helmets and 2,000 fragmentation vests with accompanying armour plates. In addition, the Ministry of Defence will make available 30 metal detectors and two wire-guided detection robots for (sea)mine detection. Finally, the Netherlands could supply two battlefield surveillance radars and five weapon location radars and 100 sniper rifles with 30,000 rounds of associated ammunition."*[323]

These commitments were made after a Cabinet meeting that same day, as Defence Minister Kajsa Ollongren stated: "The Netherlands supports Ukraine on many fronts and, like a number of other partners, will also supply military goods. We do this out of solidarity and as part of a broader package of political, financial and military support measures for Ukraine."[324] The military aid package certainly signalled a shift but the type and scale of the military aid paled in comparison to what the Dutch would offer after the invasion on 24 February 2022 that shattered peacetime assumptions held by Dutch policymakers.

7.6. **Conclusion**

In the Dutch case, Putin's preparations for an invasion were met with disbelief that Putin would actually go ahead with it. Russian military posturing was interpreted as a mere provocation rather than as a genuine threat, and Putin's rhetoric and buildup were seen as strategic manoeuvres for political leverage rather than as warnings of an impending invasion. Perceptions of Russia in the prelude to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine were affected by long-held assumptions that war was not in Russian interests. Policymakers struggled to reconcile Russia's increasingly aggressive actions with their own deeply held belief in diplomacy and international law as the primary tool of conflict resolution. At the same time, it was assumed that economic interdependence with Russia would work as a deterrent to Russia. The reliance on Russian gas, coupled with a broader European tendency to frame Russia as a difficult but manageable partner rather than an existential threat, reinforced the idea that diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation would suffice to maintain peace. This mindset explains the delay of more assertive policy responses until very late in the crisis and after the start of the invasion. Thus, the Dutch government aligned more with the cautious,

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321 Hanneke Keultjes, 'Rutte: Geen Nederlandse troepen naar Oekraïne', AD.nl, 21 January 2022, https://www.ad.nl/politiek/rutte-geen-nederlandse-troepen-naar-oekraine-af719527/.

322 'Rutte wil Oekraïne helpen: "Alles om oorlog te voorkomen"', NOS Jeugdjournaal, 2 February 2022, https://jeugdjournaal.nl/artikel/2415434-rutte-wil-oekraine-helpen-alles-om-oorlog-te-voorkomen; 'Rutte zegt Oekraïne hulp tegen cyberaanvallen toe in gesprek met president', NU, 2 February 2022, https://www.nu.nl/oekraine/6181682/rutte-zegt-oekraine-hulp-tegen-cyberaanvallen-toe-in-gesprek-met-president.html.

323 Ministerie van Defensie, 'Nederland bereid Oekraïne militaire goederen te leveren - Nieuwsbericht - Defensie.nl', nieuwsbericht, Ministerie van Defensie, 18 February 2022, https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/02/18/nederland-bereid-oekraine-militaire-goederen-te-leveren.

324 Defensie, 'Nederland bereid Oekraïne militaire goederen te leveren - Nieuwsbericht - Defensie.nl'.

diplomacy-focused stances of Germany and France rather than the more proactive, robust approaches taken by the US and the UK. Ultimately, the Dutch government shifted towards a more assertive stance which included not only committing to sanctions but also to supplying military support to Ukraine, but only shortly before the invasion. The reliance on diplomatic optimism, economic pragmatism, and a reluctance to confront hard power realities thus affected the Dutch government's willingness to respond more robustly to Russian aggression. It highlights how entrenched biases in policymaking can obstruct timely and effective responses to geopolitical threats, especially in an era where military conflict in Europe had long seemed unthinkable.

8. Crying Wolf from the Outset: The United Kingdom

Mistrust and suspicion of the Russian government ran deep in UK governmental circles. These were rooted partly in Cold War legacies, a clearer (compared to continental allies) recognition of the revisionist streak in Russia's grand strategy, as well as a series of Russian attacks on former Russian operatives and exiles on UK soil.[325] Based on the intelligence from the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), MI6, and the Five Eyes community, the UK government was outspoken about the severity of the Russian threat. It also acted early, providing Ukraine with strong political and military support short of deploying troops. This combination of strategic positioning and proactive measures marks the UK as particularly Buzzard-like in our analysis. Still, early on in the crisis, even Whitehall officials were initially quite sceptical about the prospect of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, at a time when many of them were still dealing with the fallout from the Afghanistan evacuation. This swiftly changed when intelligence started coming in. From early on military planners were tasked with thinking through worst-case scenarios and preparing response packages for each of them. The government adopted a firm and vocal stance, deploying clear language to warn Russia against invading.

8.1. A Poisonous Relationship

In the years leading up to the full-scale invasion, the UK and Russia had been at odds with one another. Although negotiations on energy issues took place between 2010-13, UK parliamentary records indicate a deterioration in bilateral communications as dealings with Russia became increasingly hostile.[326] The shift towards a more contentious relationship was cemented by the 2014 Crimea invasion. As one former senior UK official noted on the perceived threat Russia posed: "*The UK has a bit of history around this issue with Salisbury [the attempted assassination of former Russian spy Skripal and his daughter with poison in 2018]. We refer to the Russian invasion of Crimea etc. etc., So it's a sort of baseline to where we stand and where we are.*"[327] The UK regarded this as a flagrant breach of Ukraine's territorial integrity.[328]

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325 *Sergei Skripal and the 14 Deaths under Scrutiny*, 7 March 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43299598.

326 'RUS0011 - Evidence on The UK's Relations with Russia', accessed 14 February 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/63692/html/.

327 Interview 28

328 'UK's Response to the Situation in Ukraine', GOV.UK, 4 March 2014, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uks-response-to-the-situation-in-ukraine.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea then Prime Minister David Cameron declared Russia's action "completely unacceptable and illegal".[329] Foreign Secretary William Hague's condemnation of the attack as a "land grab" and a "profound breach of international law" received widespread support in parliament.[330] In response, the UK imposed sanctions focused on the Russian financial sector, arms trade, and high-tech energy goods.[331] In addition to these sanctions, which were imposed within the framework of the EU, the UK launched Operation Orbital in 2015, a training and capacity-building mission for Ukrainian officers in order to prepare them for a territorial threat.[332] As Defence Secretary Ben Wallace stated in 2019:

> "My recent visit to the Donbas region made clear not only the costs inflicted by Russian-backed separatists, but also the resolve the Ukrainian Armed Forces have demonstrated in defending their territorial integrity. That is why we are extending our training mission to Ukraine for another three years–so we may train thousands more Ukrainian personnel and continue to make a difference."[333]

A parliamentary briefing in 2015 described it as such: "The UK has some of the most difficult relations with Russia."[334] Exacerbating these tensions, particularly in the public eye, was a series of high-profile poisonings on UK soil. These included most notably Alexander Litvinenko (2006).[335] The relationship deteriorated further in 2016 when an investigation into the murder of Alexander Litvinenko concluded that Russian nationals, acting under the direction of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), were responsible.[336] Tensions deepened in 2018 with the attempted (Salisbury) assassination of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, his daughter Yulia, and Dawn Sturgess (2018), with the military-grade nerve agent Novichok, causing outrage and provoking widespread condemnation.[337] Then Defence Minister Gavin Williamson called Russia a "pariah state".[338] In retaliation, the UK expelled 23 Russian diplomats and Russia was condemned by many in the international community.[339] In solidarity with the UK, 27 NATO and EU member states expelled over 100 Russian diplomats.[340]

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329 'PM Statement on Russia's Actions in Ukraine', GOV.UK, accessed 14 February 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-on-russias-actions-in-ukraine.

330 'Ukraine: UK Condemns Russian "land Grab" of Crimea', UK Politics, *BBC News*, 18 March 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-26632857.

331 'Doing Business in Russia and Ukraine: Sanctions Latest', GOV.UK, 22 December 2014, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/doing-business-in-russia-and-ukraine-sanctions-latest.

332 'UK Programme Assistance to Ukraine 2016-2017', GOV.UK, accessed 14 February 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-programme-assistance-to-ukraine-2016-2017; 'Security Cooperation between Ukraine and the UK', 14 February 2025, https://rusi.orghttps://rusi.org.

333 'Defence Secretary Announces Extension of UK Training Mission to Ukraine', GOV.UK, accessed 26 March 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-announces-extension-of-uk-training-mission-to-ukraine.

334 'Russia and Relations with the UK', accessed 14 February 2025, https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-parliament-2015/foreign-affairs/russia/.

335 'Alexander Litvinenko: Profile of Murdered Russian Spy', UK, *BBC News*, 19 September 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19647226.

336 Luke Harding, 'Alexander Litvinenko: The Man Who Solved His Own Murder', World News, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/19/alexander-litvinenko-the-man-who-solved-his-own-murder.

337 'Novichok Inquiry: Who Was Dawn Sturgess and How Was She Poisoned?', 29 October 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5y902q0qp9o; *Russian Spy: What Happened to Sergei and Yulia Skripal?*, 10 April 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43643025.

338 Guy Faulconbridge Deutsch Anthony and Lisa Lambert, 'West Accuses "pariah State" Russia of Global Hacking Campaign', United Kingdom, *Reuters*, 5 October 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/west-accuses-pariah-state-russia-of-global-hacking-campaign-idUSKCN1ME1GL/.

339 *Spy Poisoning: Russian Diplomats Leave UK*, 20 March 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-43470069.

340 'Spy Poisoning: Nato Expels Russian Diplomats', *BBC*, 27 March 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43550938.

Before the lead-up to the 2022 invasion, the UK government had already perceived Russia to be a threat to regional stability as a result of the Russian-Georgia War in 2008, the Crimea annexation and Russia's interference in eastern Ukraine and Syria. The UK Parliament Defence Committee regarded Russia as the aggressor and concluded in 2009 that "Russia has breached internationally accepted principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity."[341] The 2021 UK's "Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy" identified Russia as "the most acute threat" to the Euro-Atlantic region, which was mirrored only in the threat assessments of Eastern European countries.[342]

8.2. **Alert and Alarmed**

The 2021 "Defence in a Competitive Age" corporate report went further citing the "modernisation of the Russian armed forces, the ability to integrate whole of state activity, and a greater appetite for risk".[343] Russia's April 2021 military manoeuvres were met with alarm; British officials saw them as a confirmation of the integrated review's assessments. Unlike some of their Western European allies, UK government officials were clear-eyed about the potential for escalation. As a result, the UK took a proactive approach to supporting Ukraine. In addition to diplomatic efforts condemning Russia and reiterating the importance of Ukrainian sovereignty, the UK expanded Operation Orbital, doubling down on existing military-to-military ties with Ukraine through which preparations could better be coordinated. As one former UK official related: "*It wasn't strictly about deterrence, yeah…I mean, it's troop training and security but it gives you presence, gives you a relationship with the Ukraine military*."[344] Russia's April 2021 military buildup also had a naval component with live fire exercises on the Black Sea.[345] In June, the UK asserted freedom of navigation in contested waters, sending warships to challenge Russia's territorial claims in the region. The situation escalated when a UK warship, *HMS Defender*, became involved in a confrontation near Crimea, with Russian forces firing warning shots and conducting aggressive flyovers to deter the British presence.[346]

In response to the buildup, the UK's Defence Committee published an inquiry report on 29 June, examining the objectives behind Russia's military buildup.[347] The report outlined several possible explanations, including the possibility that "Russia orchestrated a military buildup in retaliation against the Ukrainian President, Zelensky, for his actions to limit Russian influence in Ukraine, even if one of the contributing subject matter experts suggested that Russia's actions were "mainly aimed at pressuring, sabre rattling, and military diplomacy".[348]

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341 'House of Commons - Russia: A New Confrontation? - Defence Committee', accessed 14 February 2025, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdfence/276/27606.htm.

342 *Global Britain in a Competitive Age - The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (HM Government, 2021), 18, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

343 'The Consequences of Foreign Policy: The Review and Russia | Feature from King's College London', accessed 24 March 2025, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/the-consequences-of-foreign-policy-the-review-and-russia; 'Defence in a Competitive Age (Accessible Version)', GOV.UK, 8, accessed 14 February 2025, 30-7-2021.

344 Interview 28

345 'Russia Holds Black Sea Drills amid Tensions – DW – 04/27/2021', Dw.Com, accessed 14 February 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/russia-holds-black-sea-drills-amid-ukraine-tensions/a-57355929.

346 *HMS Defender: Russia's Putin Accuses UK and US of Military Provocation*, 30 June 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57662956.

347 'Russia and Ukraine Border Tensions - Defence Committee - House of Commons', accessed 4 April 2025, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmdfence/167/16705.htm#_idTextAnchor015.

348 'Russia and Ukraine Border Tensions - Defence Committee - House of Commons', 11.

Putin's summer essay was certainly noticed in London although it only had a moderate effect. Those who read it perceived its rhetoric to be consistent with what Putin had said before. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson recounted the essay in his book '*Unleashed*' as a very favourable account of Soviet times in which the unity of brothers was overestimated: "Which was the very point that Putin was trying to make in his rambling essay, published in the summer of 2021, in which he set out in advance the ideology of his war".[349] At the time, however, the attention was on the growing crisis in Afghanistan. As one former senior UK official put it:

> "*Also, let's be frank, the UK is going through the Afghan debacle as well in the midst of all this, which is increasingly challenging—but in some ways, that sharpens the mind. So that's sort of the top line.*"[350]

8.3. **Clear-eyed, Determined**

During the months that followed, the UK-Russia relationship remained strained, with limited diplomatic engagement and increasing political tensions. On 10 September, the Council of the European Union extended sanctions against individuals and entities deemed responsible for undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence.[351] Although no longer part of the EU, the UK joined the EU's sanction package set that day. The UK maintained its naval presence in the Black Sea with British warships continuing to carry out freedom of navigation operations, challenging Russia's maritime claims and demonstrating unwavering support for Ukraine.

When Russia started its second buildup in the autumn of 2021, the UK and its Five Eyes allies started to pick up signals that Russia was preparing for a full-scale invasion. During the G20 summit on 30 October, Joe Biden and Boris Johnson had a private meeting with the leaders of Germany, and France to warn them about the intelligence the US had received.[352] Boris Johnson added that he had received similar intelligence from MI6 that Russia was preparing for a larger conflict. These warnings marked the beginning of an intensive intelligence sharing campaign with which the US and the UK sought to convince their allies of the likelihood of a Russian invasion. As a former senior UK official noted: "*We had the advantage of the Five Eyes intelligence,*" giving them a more complete picture of what was to come.[353] Prime Minister Boris Johnson, with reference to the wavering Europeans, framed it as a choice between "sticking up for Ukraine" or advancing the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline from Russia to Europe.[354] Even if the German and French governments, among others, remained unconvinced, the UK government considered a Russian invasion ever more likely based on its Five Eyes intelligence. Still, in hindsight, there was criticism, also from within the government. A high-ranking UK military official stated:

> "*I think it took the UK, NATO, and the West far longer than it should have to accept the inevitability of the invasion. [...] There was lots of intelligence that was coming down the*

349 Boris Johnson, *Unleashed* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2024), 528.

350 Interview 28

351 'Timeline - EU Sanctions against Russia', Consilium, accessed 17 February 2025, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/timeline-sanctions-against-russia/.

352 Bob Woodward, *War* (Simon & Schuster, 2024), 72–73.

353 Interview 28

354 Rowena Mason, 'West Must Choose between Russian Gas and Supporting Ukraine, PM Warns', Politics, *The Guardian*, 15 November 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/15/west-must-choose-between-russian-gas-and-supporting-ukraine-pm-warns.

> *pipe from a very early stage that people were dismissing or reducing the importance of because that's what Russia does.*"[355]

Persuading European allies ran into difficulties, as one former senior UK official noted: "*We had the challenge that there's a perception of Five Eyes intelligence that had been less effective, going right back to Iraq and major events like that, but also more recently on what happened in Afghanistan.*"[356]

Attempts to dissuade Russia continued, as the extent of the threat had already sunk in at all levels of government. Overall, UK's senior leadership recognised the severity of the threat sooner than many of their colleagues did. As one high-ranking UK military official remarked:

> "*The UK government was quite quick to react to the intelligence and [...] thought it would be a real possibility or perhaps even a likelihood that Russia would invade. [...] It's one thing to have intelligence on communications and troop movements, but ultimately it's reading the mind of the decision-maker. [...] Despite there being debate both in the UK and in the US and across Europe, [Ben Wallace and Boris Johnson] were steadfast in their conviction that this was more likely than not, this was the way they read it.*"[357]

UK's senior leadership recognised the severity of the threat sooner than many of their colleagues did.

This early recognition enabled them to better prepare policy options geared towards a worst-case scenario in which the invasion did take place. Military planners were able to utilise this to draw up responses based on these scenarios. As one high-ranking UK military official put it:

> "*So we were definitely working on a timeline to ensure that these really practical, action-able military options that we were going to provide were going to arrive on the desk of those key decision-makers, UK decision-makers, at the same time that they suddenly went, oh fuck, wanted it to be the first thing that they reached for.*"[358]

Discussion about the appropriate level of response continued in the corridors of Whitehall, as related by another former senior UK official:

> "*There's an argument [...] as to whether you prepare a massive punishment package or whether you [...] signal what you're prepared to do in terms of sanctions and lethal aid before anything might happen.*" [359]

As intelligence reports painted an increasingly dire picture, Boris Johnson made sure to clearly state the threat posed by Russia to both domestic and international audiences, including Russia. On 24 January, he warned:

> "The intelligence is very clear that there are 60 Russian battle groups on the borders of Ukraine. The plan for a lightning war that could take out Kyiv is one that everybody can see."[360]

355 Interview 16

356 Interview 28

357 Interview 22

358 Interview 16

359 Interview 28

360 Aubrey Allegretti, 'Johnson Warns of Painful and Violent Ukraine "Lightning War"', World News, *The Guardian*, 24 January 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/24/johnson-warns-of-painful-and-violent-ukraine-lightning-war.

Just days later, on 22 January, the UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss accused Russia of seeking to topple Ukraine's government and install a puppet regime.[361] These public statements made the UK stand out as other NATO states were not quite convinced that this was going to take place. At the same time, UK diplomats had been taking increasing note of Russia's diplomatic disengagement. As one former senior UK official previously quoted related:

> "*The people I met which were on the Russian side were not particularly engaged, invested [...]. The more you are present in such situations, the less it looked like it could have started in a reasonable negotiating starting position, but the more like a rationale or justification for a course that already had seemed to be chosen.*"[362]

8.4. **Committed to Ukraine's Sovereignty**

Putin threatened him on the phone with a missile strike: "With a missile, it would only take a minute."

As the invasion loomed, the UK intensified its public warnings and actions. For example, on 23 January, the UK released detailed intelligence demonstrating Russia's plan for the aforementioned decapitation invasion.[363] This was intended to have a dual effect of signalling to Russia that there would be consequences as a form of deterrence as well as rallying international support for Ukraine. In a phone call at the end of January with Prime Minister Boris Johnson, President Putin denied any invasion plans in Ukraine and warned of the deployment of NATO missiles in Ukraine which could trigger an undesirable nuclear confrontation.[364] In his book, Johnson recalls Putin saying: "I would not want to hurt you, Boris."[365] Boris Johnson later shared in a BBC documentary that Putin threatened him on the phone with a missile strike: "With a missile, it would only take a minute."[366] On 1 February, Johnson visited Zelensky in Kyiv where he reaffirmed his support by announcing £88 million in aid and warned Putin about the consequences of an invasion.[367] Simultaneously, the UK government started talks with the Polish and Ukrainian governments to discuss the possibility of a closer trilateral security partnership in response to Russian aggression.[368] This demonstrated the UK's commitment to upholding Ukrainian sovereignty, sending a clear message to both its NATO allies and to Russia. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu stated on 11 February that bilateral relations between the two countries were "*close to zero*".[369] British military trainers stayed in Ukraine until 17 February while ensuring the safe delivery of anti-tank weapons which had been arriving since January.[370] Still, there remained hope that Putin could be dissuaded from his

361 'Kremlin Plan to Install Pro-Russian Leadership in Ukraine Exposed', GOV.UK, accessed 17 February 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/kremlin-plan-to-install-pro-russian-leadership-in-ukraine-exposed.

362 Interview 28

363 *Russia-Ukraine Tensions: UK Warns of Plot to Install pro-Moscow Ally*, 22 January 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60095459.

364 Johnson, *Unleashed*, 531–32.

365 Johnson, Boris. *Unleashed*, 2024, 532.

366 James Landale and William McLennan, 'Ukraine: Boris Johnson Says Putin Threatened Him with Missile Strike', *BBC*, 30 January 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64397745.

367 *Boris Johnson Visits Ukraine for Talks as Russian Invasion Fears Rise*, 31 January 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-60204847.

368 'United Kingdom, Poland and Ukraine Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement, February 2022', GOV.UK, accessed 3 March 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-united-kingdom-poland-and-ukraine-17-february-2022.

369 Andrew Roth et al., 'Cooperation between UK and Russia "Close to Zero", Wallace Told by Kremlin', World News, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/cooperation-between-uk-and-russia-close-to-zero-wallace-told-by-kremlin.

370 Dan Sabbagh et al., 'UK Supplying Ukraine with Anti-Tank Weapons, MPs Told', Politics, *The Guardian*, 17 January 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/17/uk-supplying-ukraine-with-anti-tank-weapons-mps-told.

plan. As a former senior UK official recalled: "*I think it's February 2022 or January. Still trying to find the days. We are still in a position where we hope we can dissuade and deter and give diplomacy a chance.*"[371] The official also added that: "*The UK still believed it could deter Russia through diplomatic means.*" [372]

Behind closed doors, Prime Minister Boris Johnson remained sceptical about Ukraine's ability to withstand a Russian assault. "No matter how plucky the Ukrainians were, we didn't think Zelensky would have the men or matériel to hold out. That was the military view. How could I contradict them?" he later described.[373] Interestingly, the Prime Minister's closest advisors were not all convinced. On 17 February, just days before the invasion, Johnson sought their opinion on the likelihood of war. "Three of the four–all except Joshi–said that Putin was bluffing, that he might be trying to destabilise Ukraine but that he would not actually invade," he recalled.[374] Unfortunately, they turned out to be wrong.

8.5. **Conclusion**

The UK government's response to Russia's military buildup and political posturing was rooted in a distrust of Russian intentions based on Cold War legacies, Russia's record of hostile leadership personalities, and an excellent intelligence position. The UK therefore adopted a more critical stance compared to other NATO states. Policymakers were more ready to take at face value Russian actions, which partly explains early military support for Ukraine. Although the highest echelons of the UK government were quick to accept the possibility of an invasion, policymakers struck a fine balance between sending military support to Ukraine and coordinating sanction packages with allies. Meanwhile, it had to overcome scepticism *vis-à-vis* the credibility of its intelligence. The UK came out as one of the more Buzzard-like European states. While it initially harboured doubts about Russian intentions and Ukrainian resilience, its deep-seated strategic mistrust of Russia allowed it to act more decisively in support of Ukraine than many of its allies.

"The UK still believed it could deter Russia through diplomatic means."

371 Interview 28

372 Interview 28

373 Johnson, *Unleashed*, 527.

374 Johnson, *Unleashed*, 534.

9. Open-eyed yet Cautious: The United States

The United States' approach to Ukraine and Russia was shaped by a combination of vectors, at times pulling in opposing directions, including a commitment to freedom and the sovereignty of Ukraine, a historical cautiousness in dealing with a nuclear peer competitor, and a sense that the US should lead the alliance and the free world. This caused the US government to tread a fine line. At the same time as it provided military support to Ukraine and rallied the G7 and the EU to impose severe economic sanction packages, it abstained from sending more robust military support including advanced weapons, let alone forces, for fears of provoking Russia. However, over the course of the crisis, the US position hardened. For example, in 2021 alone, the US had allocated $650 million in military aid to Ukraine in total, including a secretive multi-phase aid stream worth $200 million greenlit by the Biden Administration in December 2021.[375] That same month the Senate voted on the National Defense Authorization Act which extended the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative–originally established in 2016–increasing its annual budget by $50 million, from $250 to $300 million for 2022.[376] In the lead-up to the full-scale invasion, US offensive military aid packages consisted of: Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank missiles, small arms, boats, drones, artillery and ammunition.[377] By early 2022, it had established itself together with the UK and some Eastern European nations in the Buzzard camp. Having embarked on an extensive intelligence diplomacy campaign, it provided Ukraine with progressively larger military aid packages and spearheaded the preparation of an economic retaliatory response by a coalition of the willing. Although these proactive measures enabled Ukraine to be somewhat better prepared for the coming invasion and allowed the coalition to impose significant economic cost on Russia after the invasion, the US government failed to devise an approach that, in hindsight, sufficed to effectively deter Russia.

9.1. Mercurial Relations

The early 21st century history of US-Russian relations was marked by a consistently regressive trend. Starting off amicably when Vladimir Putin offered his full support to the US war on terror in the wake of 9/11, tensions would accumulate in the years thereafter. Here too, Putin's infamous 2007 Munich speech marked an important moment, when he denounced the US and its 'monopolistic dominance' in world affairs, while portraying NATO's eastward expansion as expansionist and escalatory.[378] In 2008, at the NATO Bucharest Summit, at US insistence, NATO opened its doors to future membership to Georgia and Ukraine without setting any

375 Beals, 'Ukraine Receives Second Batch of Weapons from US'.

376 'U.S. Congress Includes $300 Million for Ukraine, Addresses China in Massive Defense Bill | Reuters'.

377 Yousif, 'U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine'.

378 'Reading Russia Right', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed 3 March 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2007/05/reading-russia-right?lang=en.

concrete timeline.[379] At the summit, Vladimir Putin reportedly tried to convince George W. Bush that "Ukraine was not even a real nation-state"–apparently to no avail.[380]

That same year, Russia invaded and captured parts of Georgian territory under the pretext that they were seeking to prevent a genocide.[381] Barack Obama's 2009 'reset' with Russia that followed got off to a shaky start.[382] The gift that then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov was a button with the caption 'overload' rather than the intended 'reset' message.[383] For a limited time, the reset delivered tangible results including paving the way for the 2010 New START treaty and fostering closer cooperation between the two countries on sanctions against Iran and Afghanistan supply routes.[384] The relationship deteriorated, however, as a result of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This made it clear to the US government that Russia's use of military force against a sovereign neighbour was not a one-off event. The annexation of Crimea was met with surprise followed by condemnation by then Secretary of State John Kerry: "It is really a stunning, wilful choice by President Putin to invade another country. [...] You just don't in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext."[385] The US, joined by the EU, adopted sanctions against Russian companies and individuals, and the US started shipping defensive military equipment and offering officer training programmes to Ukraine.[386] Obama's characterisation of Russia as a "regional power" aggravated Russian leaders who grappled with the loss of their Cold War superpower status.[387]

In the years that followed, multiple incidents troubled the US-Russia relationship including Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian Civil War and Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election.[388] Despite better personal relations between President Donald Trump, who assumed office in 2017, and Putin, sanctions continued.[389] Trump even approved the delivery of additional military equipment, including *Javelin* anti-tank weaponry. Trump meanwhile put pressure on Ukrainian President Zelensky to collect information on

379 Zaryckyj Walter, 'Why the Bucharest Summit Still Matters Ten Years On', *Atlantic Council*, 4 May 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-the-bucharest-summit-still-matters-ten-years-on/.

380 James Marson / Kiev, 'Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine', TIME, 25 May 2009, https://time.com/archive/6946776/putin-to-the-west-hands-off-ukraine/.

381 'Russia's Poor Excuse For Invading Georgia - CBS News', 7 November 2008, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russias-poor-excuse-for-invading-georgia/.

382 Peter Dickinson, 'The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin's Green Light', *Atlantic Council*, 7 August 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/.

383 David S. Cloud, 'Wrong Red Button', POLITICO, 6 March 2009, https://www.politico.com/story/2009/03/video-wrong-red-button-019719.

384 McFaul Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (HMH Books, 2018).

385 Rebecca Kaplan, 'John Kerry Warns of Consequences for Russia after Ukraine Invasion - CBS News', 2 March 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kerry-warns-of-consequences-for-russia-after-ukraine-invasion/.

386 Krishnadev Calamur, 'U.S. Steps In Response To Russia's Intervention In Ukraine', Politics & Policy, *NPR*, 7 March 2014, https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/03/07/287278214/u-s-steps-in-response-to-russias-intervention-in-ukraine; U. S. Embassy Kyiv, 'FACT SHEET: U.S. Assistance to Ukraine since February 2014', U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 15 June 2016, https://ua.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-assistance-ukraine-since-february-2014/; 'Ukraine FY 2020 Country Assistance Fact Sheet', US Department of State, June 2021, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Ukraine_FY-2020-Country-Assistance-Fact-Sheet.pdf.

387 Michael D. Shear and Peter Baker, 'Obama Answers Critics, Dismissing Russia as a "Regional Power"', World, *The New York Times*, 25 March 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/26/world/europe/hague-summit-focuses-on-preventing-trafficking-of-nuclear-materials.html.

388 Damien Gayle, 'CIA Concludes Russia Interfered to Help Trump Win Election, Say Reports', US News, *The Guardian*, 10 December 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/10/cia-concludes-russia-interfered-to-help-trump-win-election-report.

389 Uri Friedman, 'America Hasn't Always Supported Ukraine Like This', Politics, *The Atlantic*, 21 November 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/11/how-vital-us-military-aid-ukraine/602407/.

Joe Biden's family's dealings in Ukraine, ultimately leading to Trump's first impeachment, and soured US-Ukraine relations.[390] Between assuming office and the autumn of 2021, the Biden administration sought to normalise ties with Russia, aiming to establish a more stable and predictable relationship, also with an eye towards reinforcing strategic stability between the two nuclear powers.[391] Relations soured, however, when Biden called Putin a "killer" and imposed sanctions on Russia for interference in US elections and cyber-attacks on US government systems in the spring of 2021.[392] In response, during a phone call addressing these issues, Putin dismissed Biden's accusations, stating: "You're wrong about everything."[393]

9.2. From Moscow with Coercion?[394]

In US government circles, Russia's April 2021 military buildup was viewed with concern but not directly interpreted as a sign of an impending invasion. This was after all part of Russia's cross-domain coercive strategy playbook.[395] Russia conducted these types of military exercises annually with Zapad exercises dating back to the Soviet Union. Military analysts noted that these exercises could be used for coercive signalling, demonstrating Russia's preparedness for war, but also that they could mask Russian preparations for an invasion.[396] The large size of the exercise did raise officials' eyebrows but was overall interpreted as a show of strength and a coercive signal. As one senior US official noted, "*The military buildup in April 2021 was a way to test Western resolve*."[397] Within this context, it was seen as a way to secure a high-level meeting between the two countries' leaders. The Biden administration initiated a summit to normalise relations with Russia, which was scheduled on 16 June in Geneva.[398] US Ambassador to Russia John J. Sullivan recalled that during the extended bilateral meeting, in which he participated, the agenda covered arms control, cybersecurity, Russia's militarisation of the Arctic, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In his memoir, Sullivan notes: "To my memory, Ukraine was not mentioned once in the expanded bilateral, although it was raised briefly in the 1+1 meeting."[399] In the press conference immediately after the event, Biden

390 Friedman, 'America Hasn't Always Supported Ukraine Like This'.

391 The White House, 'Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia', The White House, 13 April 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/13/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia-4-13/.

392 'Biden: Putin Is a "Killer", Russia to "Pay" for Election Meddling', Al Jazeera, accessed 4 March 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/17/biden-putin-is-a-killer-russia-will-pay-for-election-meddling.

393 Woodward, *War*, 24.

394 Inspired by Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, 'From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, nos 1–2 (2018): 33–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1347872.

395 Dmitry Adamsky, 'Deterrence à La Ruse: Its Uniqueness, Sources and Implications', in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_9; Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs, eds, *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, NL ARMS (T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8.

396 Pili and Minniti, 'Understanding Russia's Great Games'.

397 Interview 36-40

398 'Biden to Press Putin on Respecting Human Rights in Geneva', World, *Reuters*, 30 May 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-press-putin-respecting-human-rights-during-geneva-meeting-2021-05-30/.

399 John J. Sullivan and General Jim Mattis, *Midnight in Moscow: A Memoir from the Front Lines of Russia's War Against the West* (Little, Brown and Company, 2024), 192–93.

stated that he would continue the "United States' unwavering commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine."[400]

The summit did not however generate any meaningful results on Ukraine because of a lack of commitment on the part of Russia. *"At the summit in Geneva, Russia wasn't negotiating in good faith and was not changing its overall posture,"* explained a senior US official. [401] The official added: "*What it was really after was a reaffirmation of its status as a great power*."[402] Russia was considered to interpret calls for dialogue, especially when it stood firm, as a sign of weakness and willingness to concede.[403] The Biden administration's preference to at least engage in talks with Russia and stabilise the relationship over areas of mutual concern, specifically nuclear weapons, took precedence. Some officials in the US government still considered the summit a modest success because it helped re-establish diplomatic channels, eased tensions in some areas, and demonstrated Biden's commitment to pragmatic diplomacy.[404] One of the few things agreed to at the summit, however, was that US Ambassador to Russia John J. Sullivan was allowed to return to his post after having been advised by the Russian government to leave.

"What it was really after was a reaffirmation of its status as a great power."

Meanwhile, Russia "*effectively left forces behind in April, which they could later use as a foundation for conducting an invasion*", as one senior US official recalled, which did raise concern.[405] The failure of the summit to generate any substantive outcomes on Ukraine, as well as the absence of a clear explanation for the military buildup, marked a turning point in different parts of the US government. Intelligence agencies increasingly viewed Russian actions as more than mere posturing, keeping an ever-closer eye on how the situation at the border developed. Ultimately, however, as one former senior US Department of Defense official noted, Putin effectively "*spooked the West and Biden met with him in the summer and kind of agreed to get things back on track*."[406]

The immediate impact of Putin's subsequent summer essay on these already existing concerns should not be overstated. As National Security Council Russia director Eric Green stated: "I think it speaks to Putin's disillusionment with the Ukrainian government" which Putin appeared to be increasingly fed up with.[407] Looking back on the essay, however, one senior US official recounts that in hindsight, "*The summer essay was part of an intel operation to speak directly to the Russian-leaning people in Ukraine, mobilise support, and to flip the Ukrainian elites over to Russia*."[408] At the time, however, this was not perceived as such. In the words of CIA Director Bill Burns, "There was nothing really new in it."[409] Similar to their UK colleagues, US officials were also focused on the hastened withdrawal from Afghanistan and the takeover of the country by Taliban forces.[410]

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400 U. S. Mission Geneva, 'Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference – Geneva, Switzerland', U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, 17 June 2021, https://geneva.usmission.gov/2021/06/17/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-geneva-switzerland/.

401 Interview 36-40

402 Interview 36-40

403 Dumitru Minzarari, 'Making Sense of the Contested Biden-Putin Summit', Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 7, accessed 4 April 2025, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/making-sense-of-the-contested-biden-putin-summit.

404 Thomas Graham, 'After Geneva Summit, Daunting Diplomacy Ahead for U.S. and Russia | Council on Foreign Relations', Council on Foreign Relations, 17 June 2021, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/after-geneva-summit-daunting-diplomacy-ahead-us-and-russia.

405 Interview 36-40

406 Interview 9

407 Woodward, *War*, 44.

408 Interview 36-40

409 Woodward, *War*, 45.

410 The White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan', The White House, 14 April 2021, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/.

9.3. **Preparing for the Worst**

In this context, by late August 2021, concerns over the April buildup, at least in the public eye, seemed to have quieted down. As then US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated: "A variety of things took place that brought everybody's temperature down."[411] This was in part due to the focus on Afghanistan and as one former senior US Department of Defense official noted, speaking with hindsight:

> "*By the end of summer 2021, Putin came to the conclusion that there was a window of time, to achieve his maximalist, revisionist, imperial ambitions in Ukraine, and that window ultimately would close. And it would close because Europe would get its act back together, the US, after coming a little wobbly after Afghanistan, would get things back together.*"[412]

Moscow may have realised that this was their chance to realise these ambitions, although this view is still contested to this day. As CIA Director Bill Burns later reflected, "I think it reinforced Putin's conception of how easy it would be."[413] However, overall, the prevailing attitude was one of being watchful but cautious. The situation left many in the US government wary of what was to come. As National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne stated at the time: **"**There was a sense of 'This is not over yet' as we were leaving Geneva."[414] And although the message of the summer essay was not new, it was certainly noticed, also by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. "His rhetoric began to change quite markedly in public. At that point, our antenna went up higher. Something was shifting in his mindset."[415]

From September onwards, US intelligence services started seeing clear signs of a renewed buildup. In a classified October meeting with the president's cabinet, Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence, and CIA Director Bill Burns, presented evidence of a military plan to invade Ukraine with 175,000 troops.[416] In parallel, the Russian facade of diplomacy began to unravel. A senior US official later remarked with respect to the negotiations over Ukraine, "*It was not clear to us that the Russians were serious. From mid-October onwards, it seemed as if Russian diplomats were running on autopilot.*"[417] Recognising the gravity of the threat, the US government began to prepare for the worst and stepped-up efforts to build an international coalition. Its attempts to convey the credibility of the threat were met, as discussed in this report, with mixed reactions from US allies.[418] On 30 October, during a private session at a G20 summit, when President Biden shared US concerns about a potential full-scale invasion, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron were sceptical.[419] The German and French governments were reluctant to rely on the provided US intelligence, even if the credibility of US intelligence was enhanced by its accuracy as the crisis enveloped. As Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland recounted:

411 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.
412 Interview 9
413 Woodward, *War*, 75.
414 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.
415 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.
416 Woodward, *War*, 72.
417 Interview 36-40
418 Phythian and Strachan-Morris, 'Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War'.
419 Woodward, *War*, 72.

> "The fact that we found the [Russian war] plans when we did—and they were as robust as they were—and then they began to get played out on the ground as Putin moved more and more of his arsenal to Ukraine's borders, gave us the time that we needed to prepare."[420]

In addition to warning NATO allies, part of the US strategy focused on deterrence by diplomacy, but also on demonstrating to the Russian government that the US was aware of Moscow's plans. To deliver this direct warning, the US dispatched CIA Director Burns to Moscow to make clear to Putin that *"If you do this, there are going to be enormous costs to Russia... We're going to ensure that."*[421] At the meeting, which ended up taking place over video connection as Putin was in Sochi at the time, Putin flatly denied any intention to invade Ukraine. Meanwhile, there was no attempt to engage by the Russians, the Americans found. As one senior US official recounted after the visit: "*In our November meeting, there were no real demands. It seemed that they were happy to agree to disagree.*"[422]

"If you do this, there are going to be enormous costs to Russia... We're going to ensure that."

9.4. **Intelligence Diplomacy**

As Russia's military buildup continued throughout autumn, it was monitored with increasing alarm by senior policymakers. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recounted:

> "In September, they came to me with this map, and laid it out on my table; they explained, this was different, sir, this looks different, this is bigger in size and scale and scope, the disposition, composition of the force, etc."[423]

In response to this round of escalation, officials at the National Security Council were tasked with drafting contingency plans based on several escalation scenarios. These were then presented to Jake Sullivan around mid-November.[424] By early December, this effort resulted in the establishment of a dedicated team, the 'Tiger Team', with the task of thinking "through every possible dimension of the US response and produce a 'break glass' playbook to guide it."[425] The first draft was complete by Christmas and the playbook was later approved in the second week of February by President Biden.[426] The playbook proved to be an effective tool for quickly implementing contingency plans after the invasion had occurred, enabling the US to be better prepared from day one. The playbook also contained coercive threats through the imposition of economic costs. As a former senior US government official recalled: "*It's going to cost you 10% of your GDP if you're eventually going to invade.*"[427] Ultimately this threat was not enough to deter Russia. The potency of this threat, and whether it should only be carried out *ex post*, was debated among officials in the Tiger Team. The outcome of the discussion was that imposition of sanctions beforehand could, conversely, negatively affect

420 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.

421 Woodward, *War*, 96.

422 Interview 36-40

423 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.

424 Carnegie Corporation of New York, 'How Scholarship Can Inform Foreign Policy for Better Outcomes | Scholarship & Policy', Carnegie Corporation of New York, accessed 18 March 2025, https://www.carnegie.org/our-work/article/how-scholarship-can-inform-foreign-policy-better-outcomes/.

425 Alexander Bick, '8. Planning for the Worst: The Russia-Ukraine "Tiger Team"', in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, ed. Hal Brands (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 144, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/oa_edited_volume/chapter/3881922.

426 Bick, '8. Planning for the Worst', 146–47.

427 Interview 25

Putin's calculus because the threat would then lose its deterrent value. Others, presented with the overwhelming military concentration of forces, thought that Putin would go ahead regardless. As another former senior US Department of Defense official recalled later: "*And so I just don't think there was anything we could've credibly signalled down the cost side that would've walked him off*."[428]

In addition to the creation of the Tiger Team, the US government also formulated a communication strategy to convince allies and warn the public about the impending escalation. The goal was twofold: to increase both political as well as public awareness (so that citizens would support governmental action), and to pre-empt any potential Russian false flag operations.[429] To achieve this, the US initiated an unprecedented intelligence-sharing campaign. Classified intelligence was rapidly reviewed and declassified at an exceptionally fast pace, allowing it to be shared with the Five Eyes community and NATO allies.

"And so I just don't think there was anything we could've credibly signalled down the cost side that would've walked him off."

A detailed warning made for public consumption came on 3 December, when *The Washington Post* published an article detailing Russia's military buildup.[430] Satellite imagery revealed a significant concentration of military installations, equipment, and tents, along with an estimated 175,000 troops preparing for an invasion. The article invoked mixed reactions. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg saw the publication as a potential deterrent against Russia, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky feared it could cause widespread panic.[431] Despite the overwhelming evidence, scepticism remained, especially with the French and German governments, believing the buildup was more likely to be part of a campaign of coercive diplomacy that at most would result in a limited incursion. This was recognised by US officials, as one former senior US Department of Defense official admitted: "*The US had some intelligence baggage, you know, Iraq WMDs still loomed in the back of people's minds*."[432] A study published by *War on the* Rocks showed that the US consistently struggled to persuade allies, and that navigating the political implications of sharing intelligence remained a significant challenge.[433]

In contrast, the Five Eyes community was more receptive, benefiting from the unprecedented pooling of intelligence that provided a more comprehensive picture of the situation. As a result, Five Eyes members US, UK and Canada were quicker to mobilise and provide support, responding with greater urgency than some European allies. Four days after *The Washington Post* article was published, President Biden held a video call with Russian President Vladimir Putin. During the conversation, Putin once again flatly denied any intention to invade Ukraine.[434] According to Russian state media reports on the call, the discussion focused on the possibility of implementing legally binding security guarantees that would halt NATO's eastward expansion and prohibit the deployment of Western weapons near Russia's

428 Interview 9

429 Dylan and Maguire, 'Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War', 33. Dylan and Maguire, 'Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War', 33.

430 'Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns - The Washington Post', accessed 5 March 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html. 'Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns - The Washington Post'.

431 Dave Lawler, 'Zelensky Questions U.S. Warnings of "Imminent" Invasion in Biden Call', Axios, 28 January 2022, https://www.axios.com/2022/01/28/zelensky-biden-call-imminent-invasion.

432 Interview 9

433 'Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 1 - War on the Rocks', accessed 31 March 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/intelligence-and-the-war-in-ukraine-part-1/.

434 Woodward, *War*, 96.

borders.[435] As part of these guarantees, Ukraine would be explicitly barred from joining NATO. Despite Putin's assurances, Biden left the meeting convinced that Russia was preparing to invade.[436] This belief was reinforced by Russia's presentation of the 15 December Russian draft treaty with its demands to the US and NATO to respect Russia's spheres of influence, including by withdrawing NATO forces to its 1997 borders, which the US considered unacceptable. This cemented the US' threat assessment as one former senior US government official recounted:

> "*Over time the assessment of a potential invasion went up, and this was apparent most clearly by the holidays and early January. Senior US government officials had then concluded Russia would invade.*"[437]

It also negatively affected the US government's outlook on whether an offramp could be created through diplomatic dialogue. As US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter recalled:

> "All of its alleged concerns—everything that it was putting out there in the public domain—was really a smokescreen. They turned their backs completely on the diplomacy that we were proposing at the OSCE, the diplomacy that was being proposed on behalf of NATO."[438]

In response, the US intensified efforts to formulate a strategy should Russia proceed with an invasion. As one former senior US government official stated, "*Strategic direction from the fall was: we should prevent Putin from invading and avoid granting him the incentive.*"[439] The primary policy response spearheaded by the Tiger Team centred on economic sanctions, with Biden working to secure G7, EU, and NATO states support for a comprehensive punitive package with the goal of dissuading Russia from invading.

On 30 December, Biden held another video call with Putin, warning him that any invasion would trigger "far-reaching" sanctions.[440] Putin, in turn, dismissed these warnings and cautioned that such measures would lead to a "complete breakdown in Russia-US relations." In response and as a signal of the US' commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, the Biden administration approved a $200 million multi-phase aid package for Ukraine, while the Senate allocated an additional $300 million in military aid in December 2021. This contained offensive military aid made up primarily of a large quantity of ammunitions, *Stinger* anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank missiles, small arms, boats, drones, artillery which came on top of the $2.7 billion sent since 2014.[441]

Diplomatic efforts yielded little progress. For example, high-level negotiations were scheduled at the NATO-Russia Council on 9-10 January. However, in the lead-up to and at the meeting, no concrete agreements emerged. Russian diplomats continued to deny plans for an invasion

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435 'Press Release on Russian Draft Documents on Legal Security Guarantees from the United States and NATO - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation', accessed 5 March 2025, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1790809/.

436 Woodward, *War*, 97.

437 Interview 25

438 Banco et al., '"Something Was Badly Wrong"'.

439 Interview 25

440 Woodward, *War*, 103.

441 Yousif, 'U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine'.

while refusing to abandon the demands of their 15 December *démarche*. As one senior US official noted on Russia's negotiating position: "*This is bullshit*."[442]

The US perspective was that the primary dealbreaker centred on Ukraine's potential NATO membership. As one senior US official stated:

> "*This was also about forcing the US hand in saying that NATO membership Ukraine was out of the cards. Which the US wasn't ready to do. But NATO's membership for Ukraine was not possible in the first place, however giving up on it openly is not something we were willing to do.*"[443]

US government officials believed they had made it sufficiently clear to Russia that Ukraine would not get NATO membership, even if they did not want to be seen as giving in to Russian pressure. As one former senior US Department of Defense official noted:

> "*Now we did test the proposition, in the sense that you know, the Russians came with a laundry list, the "treaty" that they wanted, it was, like I said, from the US perspective was not seen as a serious document. Well we went back to the Russians with a whole bunch of proposals to start a conversation about changing the way military exercises happen on the Eastern Flank, confidence building measures around missile defence systems in Europe that Russians believe are dual-use, there was a whole laundry list of proposals that the Russians dismissed out of hand. Now maybe they dismissed them because they thought they were all small ball. But whatever they were trying to get, they set the bar so high, and we never got the sense that they were serious about resolving it, and it felt much more like, for whatever reason Putin believed he had a "window" to take Ukraine, and he wasn't going to be talked out of it.*"[444]

"When there isn't an actual crisis to suit their needs, they'll make one up. So we're watching for them."

From January onwards, the US government began publicly revealing more details about Russia's potential strategies. US officials disclosed that Russia was planning to stage a false flag operation designed to appear as if it were carried out by Ukraine, thereby providing Moscow with a pretext for invasion.[445] Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby stated, "When there isn't an actual crisis to suit their needs, they'll make one up. So we're watching for them."[446] On 26 January, the US and NATO formally rejected Russia's demands in the 15 December *démarche* but reiterated a willingness to continue diplomatic dialogue.[447] In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned: "If the West continues its aggressive course, Moscow will take the necessary retaliatory measures."[448] The proposed treaty had contained several "non-starters" for NATO allies, leading many to suspect that Russia

442 Interview 36-40

443 Interview 36-40

444 Interview 9

445 Julian Borger and Luke Harding, 'US Claims Russia Planning "False-Flag" Operation to Justify Ukraine Invasion', World News, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/14/us-russia-false-flag-ukraine-attack-claim.

446 'Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing', U.S. Department of Defense, accessed 5 March 2025, https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2900932/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FTranscripts%2FTranscript%2FArticle%2F2900932%2Fpentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing%2F.

447 Humeyra Pamuk et al., 'U.S. Responds to Russia Security Demands as Ukraine Tensions Mount', Europe, *Reuters*, 27 January 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-destructive-sanctions-wouldnt-hurt-putin-personally-2022-01-26/.

448 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Took Part in the "Government Hour" at the State Duma', The State Duma, 26 January 2022, http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/53300/.

had intentionally drafted it to be rejected.[449] This would allow Moscow to claim it had pursued diplomacy while painting NATO as unwilling to negotiate.

During the final critical months and weeks, President Biden sought to maintain a delicate balance between deterrence and diplomacy. His administration pursued a dual-track approach: preparing Ukraine for a potential invasion while keeping diplomatic channels open in an effort to de-escalate tensions. As Biden stated on 15 February 2022: "We are ready with diplomacy [...] to improve stability and security in Europe as a whole. And we are ready to respond decisively to a Russian attack on Ukraine."[450] A former senior US Department of Defense echoed this strategy, explaining, "*We were trying to send a combination of deterrence and reassurance signals.*" [451] Publicly, the US message began ostensibly firm. However, it quickly softened when President Biden said: "It's one thing if it's a minor incursion, and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do, et cetera."[452] This led to public outcries of disappointment since it implied that the US was only partly committed to ensuring Ukrainian sovereignty. In reaction to this statement, Volodymyr Zelensky responded quickly on X that "There is no such thing as 'minor incursions.'"[453] Press Secretary Jen Psaki rebuked President Biden's public gaffe the next day, issuing a statement clarifying that any Russian military move across the border would be met with a swift and severe response. Public messaging grew increasingly firm after that, reflecting the growing loss of confidence in diplomacy as the invasion drew nearer.

"We were trying to send a combination of deterrence and reassurance signals."

Within the US administration, discussions reflected growing uncertainty about whether deterrence efforts were sufficient. Others debated whether such economic threats were enough to alter Putin's calculus. "*Even if there was a 1% chance of dissuading him from invading, we had to try something*," another senior US official reflected. [454] But a fundamental question loomed: "*How do you convince an adversary that this is a vital interest if you are not willing to go to war for it? How do you convince them?*"[455] Some officials acknowledged that early assumptions underestimated Ukraine's ability to resist. "*This was also a failure of the imagination—that Ukraine could defend itself*."[456] Others reconsidered whether the administration's messaging had been forceful enough: "*Perhaps we could have managed the messaging differently. We could have credibly threatened with more costs, but that is looking back*."[457]

With respect to sending coercive signalling on the military front, the US government considered itself to be severely constrained in terms of what it could credibly threaten. This was made clear when President Biden stated during a press conference that under no circumstances would the US send troops: "That is not on the table [...] we have a moral obligation

449 Steven Pifer, 'Russia's Draft Agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for Rejection?', Brookings, 21 December 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection/.

450 U. S. Embassy Kyiv, 'Remarks by President Biden Providing an Update on Russia and Ukraine', U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 16 February 2022, https://ua.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-providing-an-update-on-russia-and-ukraine/.

451 Interview 9

452 Myah Ward, 'White House Looks to Clarify Biden's "minor Incursion" Comment on Russia and Ukraine', POLITICO, 19 January 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/2022/01/19/biden-ukraine-russia-527440.

453 Asma Khalid, 'How Biden Is Trying to Clean up His Comments about Russia and Ukraine', Politics, *NPR*, 20 January 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/01/20/1074466148/biden-russia-ukraine-minor-incursion.

454 Interview 36-40

455 Interview 36-40

456 Interview 36-40

457 Interview 36-40

and a legal obligation to our NATO allies [...] that obligation does not extend to... Ukraine."[458] Biden's statement left Russia with little doubt about a potential US response, undercutting the deterrent effect associated with strategic ambiguity. In bilateral contacts, the US military leadership tried to impress on their Russian counterparts that it would end up in a quagmire comparable to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. This warning was publicly reinforced on 19 December 2021, when David Ignatius wrote in *The Washington Post* about the US considering the creation of "building blocks for an insurgency".[459] This was later confirmed in an interview as one former senior US Department of Defense official recalled:

> *"Mark Milley, who is the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, in the couple weeks before war kicked off, he talked to Gerasimov and said, you have no idea what you guys are getting into, like you think this war is going to take 14 days, you're going to be stuck there for 14 years, and it's going to be horrible, and a massive strategic defeat for Russia, so don't do it. And Gerasimov was like 'why are you telling me these things, we don't intend to invade Ukraine.'"*[460]

"In essence, they told us for twenty years, and we didn't believe them."

Some officials also acknowledged that Russia's warnings about enlargement and the regional security architecture had been left unheeded. As added by a senior US official: "*We need to take adversary signalling seriously. Respond earlier and create more urgency. In essence, they told us for twenty years, and we didn't believe them.*"[461] In hindsight, some even acknowledged the overly cautious attitude on the part of Western leaders. As one senior US official admitted: "*Yes, self-deterrence may have played a role.*"[462]

9.5. **Conclusion**

The US response to Russia's escalating aggression was uniquely alert compared to most other NATO states. Initially, similar to its European counterparts, the US viewed Russia's military buildup as part of a coercive diplomacy campaign aimed at creating leverage rather than as a preparation for war. This changed when intelligence unmistakably pointed towards a full-scale invasion. The US started assembling an international coalition to impose costs, increase military support to Ukraine, and issue direct warnings to Russia. At the same time, the White House was careful to avoid provoking Russia and triggering an escalatory spiral. This was evident, among other things, in its initial reluctance to send Ukraine advanced weapons systems before and directly after the invasion. This concern led to a gradual approach to military aid, with more powerful systems being sent only after the war had already begun and Ukraine demonstrated its ability to resist. While this cautious stance was meant to prevent escalation, it also limited Ukraine's ability to fortify its defence ahead of the invasion. Despite early miscalculations regarding Putin's intentions and the effectiveness of sanctions as a deterrent, the US ultimately became Ukraine's strongest Western backer. Once the invasion plans had been uncovered, the US pivoted decisively, spearheading military assistance and rallying NATO behind sweeping sanctions. The intelligence, thus, played a crucial role in

458 Andrew Roth, 'Biden Says He Won't Send US Troops to Ukraine to Deter Russian Threat', World News, *The Guardian*, 8 December 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/russia-talks-of-rapid-ukraine-discussions-after-biden-putin-summit; Woodward, *War*, 101.

459 David Ignatius, 'Opinion | The Biden Administration Weighs Backing Ukraine Insurgents If Russia Invades', *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/19/biden-ukraine-insurgents-russia/.

460 Interview 9

461 Interview 36-40

462 Interview 36-40

enabling President Biden to pursue a more forceful, long-term strategy to supporting Ukraine and countering Russian aggression.

The case studies illustrate how misperceptions of the threat Russia posed to Ukraine were often borne from an inability to conceive the possibility of war, a failure to perceive Putin's political intent, a dogged belief in the benefits of diplomacy in the pursuit of political objectives, and consistent fear of escalation. These tendencies are reflective of a series of psychological and cognitive biases that were widespread amongst many Western policymakers in the buildup to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The following chapter examines these biases in greater detail, drawing on interviews with 44 high-level officials from NATO HQ, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States.

10. The Effect of Psychological Biases

For over half a century, first psychologists and later also political scientists and strategists have recognised the role of psychological and cognitive biases in international relations, strategy formulation, intelligence analysis, and crisis decision-making.[463] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman were among the first to unveil how cognitive shortcuts can lead to biased judgements of probability.[464] Their contributions departed from dominant rational actor models that described human behaviour, introducing psychological and cognitive limits to human rationality.[465] Robert Jervis later applied these concepts to the realm of international politics.[466] He showed how political leaders' perceptions are influenced by psychological and cognitive biases, especially when decision-making occurs under pressure.[467] Importantly, biases do not necessarily result in bad decisions. They are evolutionary adaptations that have helped humans to successfully navigate situations of uncertainty and danger. Biases can also speed up and improve decision-making.[468] For example, states with deep cultural or psychological immersion in Russian thinking, read the warning signs more clearly, most notably Poland and the Baltic states. Threat perception in international security is thus systematically influenced by psychological and cognitive processes that shape decision-makers' thinking.[469] When confronted with complex and incomplete information, decision-makers intuitively employ cognitive shortcuts to make sense of the situation. Rather than purely relying on direct observations, perceptions are shaped by salient beliefs, previous experiences and stereotypes.[470] Additionally, through what is described as motivated biases, political and state interests can subconsciously alter decision-makers' perceptions of threat.[471] For instance, mistrust in US intelligence since the Iraq 2003 invasion shaped leaders'

463 For an excellent recent overview, see Beatrice Heuser, *Flawed Strategy: Why Smart Leaders Make Bad Decisions*, Eerste editie (Polity, 2025).

464 Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1124–31.

465 Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 'Extensional versus Intuitive Reasoning: The Conjunction Fallacy in Probability Judgment', *Psychological Review* 90, no. 4 (1983): 309–14, 1984-03110-001, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.90.4.293; George A. Quattrone and Amos Tversky, 'Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice', *The American Political Science Review* 82, no. 3 (1988): 719–20, https://doi.org/10.2307/1962487.

466 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition*, REV-Revised (Princeton University Press, 1976), 28–31, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bx3.

467 Robert Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', *International Security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 3–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538549.

468 Dominic D. P. Johnson, *Strategic Instincts: The Adaptive Advantages of Cognitive Biases in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 12–28, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvz0h8t8.

469 Janice Gross Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat', *Political Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1988): 245–71, https://doi.org/10.2307/3790955; Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 241–47, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/267/monograph/book/36591.

470 Robert Jervis, 'Perceiving and Coping with Threat', in *Psychology and Deterrence*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow et al. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 18–24.

471 Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 111–12; Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 257–59.

perceptions of intelligence reports in the pre-invasion period. Many European governments including France and Germany remained sceptical. Policymakers in these governments suspected the US to be politicising the intelligence products and wrongly antagonising Russia.[472] As related by a high-ranking French military official, French officials particularly thought the US was "*trying to push us to something very aggressive, telling us lies about the more precise intel that they had*."[473]

Importantly, these psychological processes are not only rooted in individual cognitions, but interact with group-level dynamics. For example, dominant group narratives and hierarchical pressures can cause individuals to suppress dissenting opinions.[474] Based on a multi-method approach described in the method section of Chapter 1, seven psychological and cognitive biases are found to have played a particularly important role in shaping the perceptions of policymakers in NATO HQ and the five countries reviewed albeit to varying degrees (see Table 3 below*).* The remainder of this Chapter offers a concise explanation of each of the biases in conjunction with an analysis of how they affected the judgment of policymakers, building on the case narratives presented in the previous Chapters, and illustrated with quotes from our interviews. These biases impacted perceptions, shaped assessments, and informed decision-making throughout the crisis. The objective here is limited to demonstrating that these biases in effect did so, both individually and in conjunction with one another. We leave it to further research to establish the magnitude of the effects of these biases, the ranking of these biases in terms of their effect size, as well as the possible interaction effects among them that may have amplified their impact. These are interesting and relevant elements which fell outside the scope of this analysis but require further examination.

Table 3. Cognitive biases in the pre-invasion phase of the war in Ukraine.

Cognitive bias	Description
Availability heuristic	Policymakers had not experienced war: it was hard to imagine the possibility.
Cognitive dissonance	Policymakers dismissed key intelligence that conflicted with preexisting ideas and beliefs about engagement with Russia.
Mirror imaging	Policymakers projected their own rationality and strategic thinking onto Russia: war is irrational from a Western perspective, therefore our opponent will think so too.
Poliheuristic bias	Policymakers preferred not to consider politically unpalatable situations that would come with high (domestic) costs.
Representativeness heuristic	Policymakers overestimated Russia's capabilities on its recent successes in other types of conflicts and underestimated Ukrainian capabilities.
Groupthink	Policymakers did not openly consider scenarios and options that were seen to be at odds with existing dominant narratives within organisations.
Self-deterrence	Policymakers refrained from taking stronger action out of fear for further escalation by the adversary.

472 Stephanie Carvin, 'Deterrence, Disruption and Declassification: Intelligence in the Ukraine Conflict', Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2 May 2022, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/deterrence-disruption-and-declassification-intelligence-in-the-ukraine-conflict/.; Joshua C. Huminski, 'Russia, Ukraine, and the Future Use of Strategic Intelligence', *PRISM* 10, no. 3 (2023): 14.

473 Interview 27

474 Irving Lester Janis, *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), 4–9.

10.1. **Availability Heuristic**

Over the past few decades, Western societies at large had not been exposed to the experience of large-scale conventional war on the European continent. The interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere took place far away from Western homelands. In public and political consciousness these did not equate to war and were largely seen as wars of choice. Western European societies especially had taken the US security guarantee for granted. It enabled them to reap an extended peace dividend, taking peace as the normal state of affairs.[475] Consequently, when faced with the Russian military buildup along the border of Ukraine, political leaders, policymakers and the wider populations they served dismissed the threat of an actual invasion. Because leaders had not experienced war themselves, they were unable to conceive of the possibility of a military conflict on the European continent.

Because leaders had not experienced war themselves, they were unable to conceive of the possibility of a military conflict on the European continent.

In their seminal work, Tversky and Kahneman identified this pattern as the availability heuristic in decision-making, referring to "situations in which people assess the frequency of a class or the probability of an event by the ease with which instances or occurrences can be brought to mind."[476] While essential for simplifying decision-making under uncertainty, the heuristic can often lead to distorted judgements. Especially in high-stakes contexts, perceptions of political leaders and policymakers will be dominated by salient events, personal experiences, and their own intentions. In the decision-making process, these perceptions result in a disproportionate emphasis on specific instances, at the expense of less obvious or longer-term considerations. Thus, individuals who have not personally experienced war are less likely to consider it a legitimate possibility.[477]

Underlying the availability heuristic are cognitive processes that revolve around the ease with which instances come to mind. Recency of events, vividness and emotional salience amplify the availability of memories, biasing threat perception.[478] The result is a neglect of probability; individuals under- or overestimate the likelihood of certain events based on the memories available to them.[479] These claims are supported by statistical and experimental studies that found evidence for the availability heuristic in the broader population.[480] Although major statistical studies on the availability heuristic in political elite decision-making are limited, there is plenty of research that suggests that decision-makers are heavily influenced by availability heuristic biases.[481]

475 R. Daniel Kelemen and Kathleen R. McNamara, 'State-Building and the European Union: Markets, War, and Europe's Uneven Political Development', *Comparative Political Studies* 0, no. 0 (2021): 8–9. Kelemen and McNamara, 'State-Building and the European Union: Markets, War, and Europe's Uneven Political Development', 8–9.

476 Tversky and Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', 1127.

477 Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 252.

478 C.L. Curt and E.B. Zechmeister, 'Primacy, Recency, and the Availability Heuristic', *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 22, no. 3 (1984): 177–79; Tversky and Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', 1128; Colin MacLeod and Lynlee Campbell, 'Memory Accessibility and Probability Judgments: An Experimental Evaluation of the Availability Heuristic', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63, no. 6 (1992): 895–97, 1993-12232-001, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.63.6.890.

479 Martina Raue and Sabine G. Scholl, 'The Use of Heuristics in Decision Making Under Risk and Uncertainty', in *Psychological Perspectives on Risk and Risk Analysis : Theory, Models, and Applications*, ed. Martina Raue et al. (Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 156, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/leidenuniv/detail.action?docID=5518683.

480 John S. Carroll, 'The Effect of Imagining an Event on Expectations for the Event: An Interpretation in Terms of the Availability Heuristic', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (New York) 14, no. 1 (1978): 94–95, https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(78)90062-8; Thorsten Pachur et al., 'How Do People Judge Risks: Availability Heuristic, Affect Heuristic, or Both?', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 18, no. 3 (2012): 324–25, 2012-11974-001, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028279.

481 Barbara Vis, 'Heuristics and Political Elites' Judgment and Decision-Making', *Political Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2019): 45, https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929917750311.

The bias has, for example, influenced President Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam war. Drawing on experiences with German appeasement in the 1930s, he became convinced of the need for strong military intervention to prevent communist world domination. In doing so, he dismissed Undersecretary George Ball's warnings, based on the French experience, that military force would be ineffective against a local insurgency.[482] In another example, Brezhnev's surprisingly restrained behaviour in the Yom Kippur War has been attributed to the availability heuristic. His response reflected his experience within the Soviet political system, where survival often depended on patience and avoiding overreach.[483] Lastly, in his response to the North Korean invasion of South Korea, President Truman was guided by previous experiences in which military aggression went unchallenged: "I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failure to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead."[484]

"Those generations have not experienced any real war. That was simply beyond imagination."

10.1.1. The Availability Heuristic and the War in Ukraine

Perceptions across different NATO allies were influenced by the availability heuristic, as they downplayed the extent of Russia's ambitions and underrated the severity of the threat. The availability bias was specifically prominent among the French, German, and Dutch governments, where officials found it difficult to envisage a full-scale invasion scenario, which they considered both unlikely and unfeasible. Instead, the military buildup was seen as a show of force and an intimidation attempt, with Russia doubling down on its threat discarded as unimaginable.

Interviews with senior political and military policymakers from various NATO member states suggest that the availability heuristic heavily shaped Western threat perceptions in the months leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As related by a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the possibility of war on the European continent had become unimaginable to them: *"I don't think that many thought, if we don't react seriously to this, then we go into war with Russia. I don't think it was taken seriously. Maybe because it was unrealistic."*[485] In the words of a former senior official from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> "*Because I think in the West, let's talk about Europe, we have lived in such relative peace on our continent for so long. Those generations have not experienced any real war. That was simply beyond imagination.*"[486]

Similarly, a high-ranking French military official noted:

> "*We had totally forgotten the lessons from the past, from the Cold War. We had to rethink and relearn everything. [...] We are the generation of counterterrorism, counterinsurgencies. So, the comeback on the scene of the spectrum of another war, a global war on the European territory was something not in the mindset.*"[487]

[482] Michael Cohen, 'The Availability Heuristic, Political Leaders, and Decision Making', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2019), 10–14, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1028.

[483] Cohen, 'The Availability Heuristic, Political Leaders, and Decision Making', 13–14; James M. Goldgeier, *Leadership Style and Soviet Foreign Policy : Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev*, with Internet Archive (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 74–75, http://archive.org/details/leadershipstyles-0000gold.

[484] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 218.

[485] Interview 7

[486] Interview 41

[487] Interview 27

According to the same official, this stood in direct contrast to the perceptions among policymakers on the other side of Europe, who had direct historical experience with Russian aggression and who were able to imagine the possibility of war:

> "*The most impressive help from European countries came from those directly concerned and directly threatened by the second wave of Russia. [...] So that was the Baltic countries, Poland, those ones were so concerned that they were ready to give up everything.*"[488]

Given that a full-scale invasion seemed unimaginable, Russia's military buildup was interpreted as a way to put pressure on Ukraine into making concessions, according to a former senior US Department of Defense official:

> "*I think most of the alliance believed this was a coercive play, not a play to conquer all of Ukraine. And that at most, what Russia might be doing is preparing to do something in the East. To seize the Donbas.*"[489]

"I think most of the alliance believed this was a coercive play, not a play to conquer all of Ukraine."

A senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official agreed, observing:

> "*We have made a real mistake thinking, in France, that we were in a kind of coercive diplomacy situation. We thought that the military drills around Ukraine were an element of pressure in order for Russia to get from Zelensky and from Ukraine a number of concessions on the implementation of the Minsk Agreements.*"[490]

Within the alliance itself, the availability heuristic incentivised NATO officials to downplay Russia's nuclear deterrent which had not been discussed since the Cold War. One former high-ranking NATO military official mentioned the staff's lack of experience in identifying deterrence strategies, observing that:

> "*We were watching [Russia's more complex exercises and use of dual-capable bombers] and we were explaining that [...] what we're seeing is nuclear messaging from Russia. [...] We had to re-educate leadership that hadn't been confronted with this [nuclear deterrence] since the Cold War. So since the 1980s, this hadn't been a discussion. [...] It was a re-education process.*"[491]

A high-ranking French military official further confirmed that officials, especially in the intelligence domain, failed to notice the stages of a conventional buildup because of their inexperience, recognising that:

> "*The military intelligence community was not dimensioned to understand [conventional war]. It was not organised for that. It was not equipped for that.*"[492]

Another high-ranking German official noticed a similar trend as he recalled:

488 Interview 27
489 Interview 9
490 Interview 29
491 Interview 3
492 Interview 27

> "*There was still hesitancy as people who wanted to see an attack saw it and those that didn't could also see that it wouldn't happen. The blood bags should have been a clearer message.*"[493]

In addition to a general lack of experience with war, previous Russian military exercises influenced threat assessments leading up to the invasion. As explained by a senior Dutch military official: *"It was a normal pattern leading up to the annual exercise. It was all reporting done on Russian and Belarusian media. And it looked like a normal buildup."*[494] According to a high-ranking French military official the Russians had *"been doing lots of big exercises in that area with Zapad exercises for years. It was about building up troops just to have this coercive diplomacy and to put some pressure on Western countries."*[495] Because previous exercises followed similar buildup patterns, NATO allies were divided in their threat assessments. As one senior NATO official recalled: *"If you would have asked: 'Is this exercise preparation for conventional war?' I don't think you would have had one response. I think you would have a variety of responses."*[496] For instance, paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Germany understood Russia's threats, including the summer essay, the demands sent to NATO, and the military preparations as part of Putin's usual *modus operandi*, and not necessarily signalling that war was coming.[497] Many NATO officials also perceived conventional war as unlikely, as related by a senior NATO official:

"We weren't thinking as much about conventional war."

> "*We were going to continue to prepare for an adversary relationship with the Russian Federation, mostly in the grey zone and mostly below the threshold. We weren't thinking as much about conventional war.*"[498]

In the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of February 2022, the availability heuristic operated in two directions. Because many Western decision-makers and policymakers had not experienced war themselves, the possibility of a Russian invasion had become difficult to imagine. As a result, they were prone to dismissing signs indicating a pending invasion. In contrast, those in countries that did in recent history experience Russian aggression were able to imagine the possibility of war and believed in the likelihood of a Russian invasion.

10.2. **Cognitive Dissonance**

The threat of a large-scale conventional war on the European continent clashed with policymakers' beliefs about the European security architecture and the pacifying effects of economic interdependence. Germany's previously referenced tradition of *Ostpolitik* and *Wandel durch Handel* was emblematic of these beliefs. Acknowledging the threat of a Russian invasion would have meant rejecting the cornerstones of German foreign policy.[499] Consequently, when confronted with evidence that challenged their preexisting ideas about engagement with Russia, German and other Western policymakers were prone to either dismissing or reinterpreting the information they were presented with. They tried to make

493 Interview 43
494 Interview 10
495 Interview 27
496 Interview 2
497 Interview 14
498 Interview 2
499 Bernhard Blumenau, 'Breaking with Convention? Zeitenwende and the Traditional Pillars of German Foreign Policy', *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (n.d.): 1905–8, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac166.

the data fit their worldview, rather than the other way around. This may also have been the case for Russia experts which did not pick up on the credibility of a full-scale invasion as they dismissed early warning signs as rhetoric rather than justification.

This phenomenon was first conceptualised by Leon Festinger as cognitive dissonance, the psychological discomfort that arises when new information challenges an individual's existing beliefs. It is a state in which "the reality which impinges on a person will exert pressures in the direction of bringing the appropriate cognitive elements into correspondence with that reality."[500] In other words, individuals will seek to reduce the dissonance they experience by adjusting their interpretations of new information or avoiding data that conflicts with their existing beliefs.[501] Especially when dealing with uncertainty, high stakes and time pressure, cognitive dissonance is one of many cognitive biases that can influence decision-making.[502] In his seminal work, Robert Jervis subsequently linked cognitive dissonance to political and military decision-making, illustrating its influence on threat perception in international relations.[503]

The psychological discomfort that arises when new information challenges an individual's existing beliefs.

The psychological mechanisms driving cognitive dissonance bias revolve around the individual's need to maintain cognitive consistency. Strategies to alleviate the discomfort caused by dissonance include selective exposure to information, reinterpretation of conflicting evidence or dismissal of inconvenient facts.[504] Experimental research by the American political psychologist Philip Tetlock has demonstrated how these processes operate among international relations experts, revealing their resistance to updating prior judgements and their tendency to neutralise evidence that challenges their beliefs.[505] Additionally, the application of cognitive dissonance in intelligence environments highlights how the need for secure and stable knowledge can lead to intelligence failures, as analysts may ignore contradictory evidence.[506] A historical example can be found in Israel's 1973 belief in its military superiority and deterrence posture, which rendered its intelligence services unable to reconcile intelligence suggesting the country was in imminent danger of an Egyptian-Syrian invasion.[507]

10.2.1. **Cognitive Dissonance and the War in Ukraine**

Cognitive dissonance shaped the perceptions of policymakers across the alliance, leading to diverging interpretations of key intelligence and creating political division among them. Cognitive dissonance played a prominent role in France, Germany, and the UK, especially. French and German officials were deeply sceptical about the possibility of a full-scale

500 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford University Press, 1957), 11.

501 Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 29–31.

502 Steve A. Yetiv, *National Security through a Cockeyed Lens* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 4, https://doi.org/10.1353/book.49244.

503 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 382–87.

504 Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 257–58.

505 Philip E. Tetlock, 'Theory-Driven Reasoning About Plausible Pasts and Probable Futures in World Politics: Are We Prisoners of Our Preconceptions?', *American Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 2 (1999): 357–58, https://doi.org/10.2307/2991798.

506 Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, 'Change the Analyst and Not the System: A Different Approach to Intelligence Reform', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4, no. 2 (2008): 141–42, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2007.00061.x; Kjetil Anders Hatlebrekke and M. L.R. Smith, 'Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure', *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 2 (2010): 157–60.

507 Hatlebrekke and Smith, 'Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure', 153–56.

invasion, believing that diplomacy would prevail, while some UK advisors at the highest echelons of governments continued to believe it likely that Putin was bluffing up till shortly before the invasion. Interestingly, while these Western European states-except for the UK-were less receptive to the likelihood of a full-scale invasion, Central and Eastern European states-especially Poland and the Baltic states-demonstrated greater receptiveness to the threat, possibly due to historical memory and different framing of Russia's strategic behaviour.

In the buildup to the war in Ukraine, Western allies were not ready to accept the possibility of war on the European continent. As noted by a high-ranking Dutch military official: *"There was a perception of 'it is not going to happen'. Not because there were no signs that it was not going to happen, but because we did not want it to happen."*[508] Cognitive dissonance led decision-makers across the alliance to dismiss intelligence pointing to an invasion, as a senior NATO official observed: *"I think there was still disbelief, even though the intelligence assessment at that point was fairly clear. But the political evaluation still varied."*[509] As explained by that same high-ranking Dutch military official, policymakers cognitively discarded the possibility of an invasion, *"not perse because they want to block it, but because in their system it does not fit."*[510]

"I think there was still disbelief, even though the intelligence assessment at that point was fairly clear."

Another striking example of this was the Western reaction to Russia's 15 December 2021 *démarche* which demanded sweeping security guarantees. Despite the severity of these demands, many NATO officials and policymakers chose not to treat them as such. Rather than recognising it as a serious escalation, it was downplayed as an opening bid in a negotiation. This response reflected an ingrained mental model that such diplomatic moves, no matter how aggressive, remained within the realm of symbolic posturing, rather than a prelude to war.

Years of economic and diplomatic engagement with Russia had made Western policymakers believe in peaceful coexistence. As explained by a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official

> "*I think then, and now to a certain extent still, but to a far lesser extent, that's true, we were caught in a world where we would have a NATO-Russia Council where we would still find areas of cooperation: Afghanistan, anti-terrorism, nuclear disarmament. There were still fora in which the Russians maintained a parlour with which we could live, to say the least, or even subscribe to.*"[511]

In the words of a senior NATO official: *"There was a lack of understanding and disbelief about the situation. Disbelief that was still present after the Munich Security Conference in 2022."*[512]

In France too, the prospects of war on the border of Europe conflicted with previous beliefs about European security, according to a high-ranking French military official:

> "*Collectively we did not want to believe in the return of war to Europe. There was a kind of blindness, a kind of taboo. [...] Even if we had written that [France had to prepare for high-intensity war on European borders], subconsciously we did not want to believe the time had come.*"[513]

508 Interview 11
509 Interview 2
510 Interview 11
511 Interview 7
512 Interview 13
513 Interview 23

Similarly, a high-ranking UK military official explained that many officials and experts both in the UK and within the alliance dismissed or downplayed the possibility of an invasion, arguing that:

> "*[Invading Ukraine] is an almost unthinkable thing for Russia to do. [...] All of those people who are experts because they're watching [Russia] all the time, they've just seen [further aggression] as a really slow incremental gain and so dismissed it. But I think that we should have been able to pick it up earlier. I think that there was too much emotion in the analysis. The analysis needed to be confident.*"[514]

The German government also found it hard to believe Putin would invade Ukraine and dismissed such a scenario. Paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, war was not viewed as a realistic option, as there was a strong belief that Germany should coexist with Russia. This outlook, originating in the Weimar Republic, endured through the Cold War and still holds relevance in the East today.[515]

"But I think that we should have been able to pick it up earlier. I think that there was too much emotion in the analysis."

Meanwhile, a senior NATO official suggested that policymakers in countries in closer proximity to Russia, who perceived Russia as an existential threat, had less difficulty acknowledging the realities on the ground, compared to those in Western Europe, who came from an entirely different historical experience and strategic culture. It was, in his view:

> "*A cultural shock between believing your strategic culture, which says this makes no sense and this is not going to happen because it makes no sense, and the facts on the ground. And depending on how close you sit to Russia and what is your relationship to Russia historically, breaking that, reconciling that dichotomy became easier.*"[516]

Cognitive dissonance thus shaped perceptions and affected decision-making. Policymakers struggled to reconcile the possibility of large-scale Russian military aggression on the European continent with dominant beliefs about peaceful coexistence, diplomatic relations and economic cooperation with Russia.

10.3. **Mirror Imaging**

In the months leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion, policymakers downplayed the likelihood of an invasion because they considered it irrational for Putin to make such a decision. Economic interests and costs were thought to weigh heavily on Putin's cost-benefit analysis, making an invasion seem unlikely in the eyes of Western policymakers and their advisors.[517] Analysts, however, underestimated the risks the Kremlin was willing to take and the value it assigned to Russian control over Ukraine. Additionally, they overlooked the fact that the Russian leadership was operating under different assumptions about Ukrainian and Western resolve, anticipating lower costs of an invasion.[518] In the absence of a deeper understanding

514 Interview 16

515 Interview 14

516 Interview 2

517 Loren Thompson, 'Why Putin Won't Invade Ukraine', Forbes, 12 June 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2021/12/06/quick-take-why-putin-wont-invade-ukraine/; Harlan Ullman, 'Why Putin Won't Invade Ukraine', *Atlantic Council*, 16 February 2022, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-putin-wont-invade-ukraine/.

518 Driedger and Polianskii, 'Utility-Based Predictions of Military Escalation: Why Experts Forecasted Russia Would Not Invade Ukraine', 548–51.

of Russian strategic thinking, decision-makers and their advisors wrongly projected their own rationality and ideas onto Russia, leading them to underestimate the threat of an invasion.

This phenomenon, known as mirror imaging, was, to our knowledge, first coined by Urie Bronfenbrenner in his personal account of Soviet-American relations during the Cold War. He described how both countries projected their own beliefs, values and rational logics onto each other, leading to misunderstandings about each other's societies and strategic thinking.[519] Robert Jervis later demonstrated that such misunderstandings could result in flawed evaluations of a state's intentions and actions, thereby biasing threat perception. Especially during crises, decision-makers might assume their adversary to share the same strategic priorities and thinking as themselves, leading to misinterpretations of the adversary's actions.[520]

By projecting familiar ways of thinking onto others, mirror imaging offers a cognitive shortcut that allows an individual to simplify complex decision-making processes.

By projecting familiar ways of thinking onto others, mirror imaging offers a cognitive shortcut that allows an individual to simplify complex decision-making processes. Instead of relying on in depth knowledge about cultural and strategic differences, threat perception of the adversary is based on an image shaped by decision-makers' own beliefs and rational logic.[521] Experimental research has replicated this process, proving that projected images influence the interpretation of an adversary's intentions and actions.[522] The Cuban Missile Crisis illustrates this phenomenon, showing how US decision-makers projected their own strategic thinking onto their counterparts in the Soviet Union, leading them to underestimate the likelihood of Soviet missile deployments in Cuba.[523] Similarly, Jervis describes how Japanese leaders underestimated the significance America would assign to an attack on Pearl Harbor, not anticipating that it would provoke a large-scale war effort.[524]

10.3.1. Mirror Imaging and the War in Ukraine

Mirror imaging was certainly at play throughout the duration of the crisis among some at NATO HQ and individual allied governments, undermining their ability to understand Putin's motives despite the availability of ample intelligence. Western policymakers struggled, for example, to interpret the rhetorical cues embedded in Putin's July 2021 essay. In many Western political cultures, leaders do not invoke history or destiny as strategic tools, and such narratives are often dismissed as symbolic or theatrical. Mirror imaging was particularly prevalent in France, Germany, and the Netherlands but was also manifest in the US, where officials initially believed that Putin preferred to secure concessions instead of preparing for a full-scale invasion. Within NATO HQ too, officials held on to the belief that deterrence could be achieved through economic sanctions, ultimately leading them to underestimate the Russian threat.

519 Urie Bronfenbrenner, 'The Mirror Image in Soviet–American Relations: A Social Psychologist's Report', *Social Issues* 17, no. 3 (1961): 54–56.

520 Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', 5–8; Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 249–51.

521 Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 249–51.

522 Richard K. Herrmann et al., 'Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata', *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1997): 417–19.

523 Jonathan Renshon, 'Mirroring Risk: The Cuban Missile Estimation', *Intelligence and National Security* 24, no. 3 (2009): 336–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520903036917; Raymond L. Garthoff, 'US Intelligence in the Cuban Missile Crisis', *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 3 (1998): 46–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/02684529808432493.

524 Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', 7.

Interviewed officials agreed that Western threat perception of a potential Russian invasion was biased by projecting their own strategic logic onto Russia. As related by a high-ranking UK military official:

> "*[Western intelligence analysts] have applied a westernised perspective on the issue, on what we knew about the Ukrainians and [...] Ukrainian resistance and what we knew about the effectiveness of the Ukrainian military and the Russian military. [But] you have to look at that problem through a Russian lens. [...] What were the Russian decision-makers thinking?*"[525]

This bias was also manifested in the French ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, as argued by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

> "*We have made a strategic mistake in trying to understand what they were doing just at the borders of Ukraine by using our own software and our own sense of rationality which was basically that launching a full-scale invasion or attack of Ukraine would not make any sense. Which after more than a thousand days of war is absolutely true, it was a strategic mistake, it had no sense. But the mistake that we have made was to think that our rationality was exactly the same as Putin's.*"[526]

"If the other side cares more about the issue than you do, they will be hard to deter."

Another high-ranking French military official agreed: *"Everybody was very quiet, very peaceful about what the risks [of an invasion] were. Because we were so confident that it was irrational in our rationality*."[527] This divergence between Western and Russian rationalities was also noticed in other countries such as the Netherlands. A senior Dutch military official admitted:

> "*I just didn't want to believe the Russian aims because I was too much stuck in my own convictions about rational thinking, about Western values, about preventing war because war is too costly, and all that kind of thinking.*"[528]

At NATO HQ too there were lingering doubts about Russia's motives for an invasion, as one official recalled: "*The intelligence briefers were saying: 'We see this, this is the image, these are the numbers.' And then some of the questions inevitably would be, 'but why would Putin do this?'*"[529] Because the West did not understand Russia's motives, it misjudged the risks it was willing to take. This fundamentally undermined Western efforts to dissuade Russia. According to a former senior US Department of Defense official:

> "*If the other side cares more about the issue than you do, they will be hard to deter. They will be hard to deter, because they will be very motivated, and they would be willing to take more risks to achieve their objectives.*"[530]

While tensions worsened at the beginning of 2022, Western officials still doubted the nature of the invasion, even in the US. Most US officials believed in a full-scale invasion, but a few officials still thought that Putin would limit his attack to a territorial grab. As one former senior US government official recalled:

525 Interview 16
526 Interview 29
527 Interview 27
528 Interview 10
529 Interview 2
530 Interview 9

> "*Over time the assessment of a potential invasion went up, and this was apparent most clearly by the holidays and early January. Senior US government officials had then concluded Russia would invade. But still, in early February, there were big questions whether he [Putin] would actually go full-scale rather than partial.*"[531]

Another former senior US Department of Defense official who believed in a limited attack shared his understanding of Putin's objectives and admitted:

> *"It's not clear to me that Putin's objectives could be achieved through the neutralisation of Ukraine. I think Putin's objectives ultimately needed Russia to seize, at least, Ukraine up to Dnieper River, both because of Putin's visions and understanding of history, and where Ukraine plays in Russia's imperial past. But also because I think Putin believes in the absence of controlling, at least the Eastern portions of Ukraine, Russia lacks sufficient strategic depth. And so, the neutralisation of Ukraine and closing NATO's open door for example, doesn't achieve those objectives.*"[532]

"We just waived the threat of economic sanctions, and we probably thought it was enough."

Through the Western-looking glass of Western strategists, economic sanctions were expected to tip Putin's cost-benefit analysis. A former senior US government official recalled: "*There was bilateral messaging about economic costs imposed by the US that were expected to be seen by the Russians*."[533] The US sent clear threats to Russia and believed it would deter Putin. The same official shared one of these threats addressed to Putin: "*It's going to cost you 10% of your GDP if you're eventually going to invade*." [534]

Similarly, in the words of a high-ranking French military official:

> "*We just waved the threat of economic sanctions, and we probably thought it was enough, and that was also a problem. Sometimes we consider that economic sanctions are the easiest way, the only way to solve this kind of problem.*"[535]

This was especially the case for the German government. Paraphrasing a senior German Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the German government believed that its emphasis on *Ostpolitik* and *Wandel durch Handel* would influence Putin's plans and therefore pursued these policies until the invasion.[536]

A lack of knowledge about Russian strategic thinking underlay the occurrence of mirror imaging. According to a paraphrased Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the Netherlands had an insufficient grasp of how the enemy functions.[537] Paraphrasing another senior Dutch Ministry of Affairs official, Putin was not expected to invade, as it was believed he already had everything he needed including control over Ukraine, sufficient energy resources, and essential business connections.[538] Comparing Russian and Western strategic thinking, a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official also highlighted the importance of being able to think like your adversary:

531 Interview 25
532 Interview 9
533 Interview 25
534 Interview 25
535 Interview 23
536 Interview 14
537 Interview 1
538 Interview 8

> "*It is something in terms of foreign policy, which is absolutely crucial. Not to think about our adversaries and their deeds, plans and intentions with our own lenses, with our own rationality, with our own vision. But trying, which is in the end the basis of the diplomatic work, to think about what our competitors and enemies could do with their own lenses and rationality, and not with ours.*"[539]

In the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine, mirror imaging led Western decision-makers to project their own strategic thinking onto Russia. Because of the economic consequences of the sanctions the West would impose on Russia if it invaded, Western policymakers considered a potential invasion to be irrational and, therefore, unlikely. In doing so, they ignored the significance of the cultural, historical and security interests Russia assigned to Ukraine and the fact that the threat of economic punishment would not suffice. In sum, mirror imaging prevented a fuller understanding of Russian interests and strategic logic.

"Political leaders are likely to reject outright any alternative that poses potentially very high political costs."

10.4. **Poliheuristic Bias**

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a surge in public support across Europe has played a major role in enabling political leaders to provide Ukraine with military aid.[540] Prior to the invasion, however, a lack of urgency and of public support acted as a constraint on the willingness and ability of political leaders to offer such support. They operated in domestic environments in which the provision of military support to Ukraine did not necessarily receive widespread support because it clashed with prevailing beliefs about the world. In the consideration of different courses of action, Western decision-makers may have dismissed measures offered by their policy advisors that would come with high political costs, before considering remaining policy options. Against this background, potential domestic political costs associated with supporting Ukraine could have contributed to policy environments in which the threat of an invasion was rated as unlikely.

In his seminal work, Alex Mintz conceptualised this two-stage process as poliheuristic decision-making in foreign policy in which decision-makers assess policy alternatives on the basis of various dimensions. In the first stage of this process, decision-makers reject policy options that fail to meet a critical dimension such as political survivability of the leader. Because the dimension is perceived as critical, higher scores on other dimensions cannot compensate for its shortcomings. [541] As a result, "political leaders are likely to reject outright any alternative that poses potentially very high political costs, even if that same alternative also yields potentially high benefits on other dimensions."[542] In the second stage, remaining policy alternatives are assessed on their utility and risk, for example on the military or economic dimension. Policy options that come with high domestic costs, however, have already been removed from the decision-set at this stage. Thus, poliheuristic bias in threat perception occurs when decision-makers prefer not to consider politically unpalatable situations that could potentially come with high domestic costs.

539 Interview 29

540 Ivan Krastev Leonard Mark, 'Wars and Elections: How European Leaders Can Maintain Public Support for Ukraine', ECFR, 20 February 2024, https://ecfr.eu/publication/wars-and-elections-how-european-leaders-can-maintain-public-support-for-ukraine/.

541 Alex Mintz, 'The Decision to Attack Iraq: A Noncompensatory Theory of Decision Making', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 37, no. 4 (1993): 598, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002793037004001.

542 Alex Mintz, 'How Do Leaders Make Decisions?: A Poliheuristic Perspective', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 1 (2004): 7.

Like other cognitive shortcuts, the poliheuristic allows decision-makers to simplify complex choice sets when faced with uncertainty and time pressure. By eliminating politically undesirable options, 'rational' choices in the second stage of decision-making are simplified.[543] Importantly, the heuristic only operates when the question at hand is salient to the political leader's electoral support base.[544] Additionally, a combination of characteristics like distrust, military assertiveness, need for power and belief in the ability to control events, reduces leaders' sensitivity to domestic costs in foreign policy decision-making.[545] Statistical analysis of international crises shows that perceived domestic political loss constrains a political leader's decision to initiate violence, in support of the theoretical claims offered by the poliheuristic model.[546] Finally, the poliheuristic bias is prone to generating hierarchical pressures down the decision-chain, discouraging policymakers from presenting unpalatable policy options to higher levels. As a result, the bias may foster groupthink, in which unconventional policy options are not considered.

"By eliminating politically undesirable options, 'rational' choices in the second stage of decision-making are simplified."

Examples of poliheuristic foreign policy decisions include Pakistan's decision to test a nuclear bomb–influenced by the domestic political costs of inaction–and Saddam Hussein's decision not to withdraw his troops from Kuwait–guided by his need to reinforce domestic authority through external power projection.[547] During the Iran hostage crisis, finally, President Carter was under severe electoral pressure to ensure the hostages' immediate and safe release. Influenced by American public opinion, Carter rejected policy alternatives that could put this objective at risk, such as mining harbours or seizing territory. Only after that, he carefully weighed the relative costs and benefits of the remaining strategies on a military and strategic dimension.[548]

10.4.1. Poliheuristic Bias and the War in Ukraine

Across the different cases reviewed, the poliheuristic bias may have contributed to the tendency of decision-makers and their advisors to downplay the threat of a full-scale invasion and limit the nature of deterrent responses because of the enormous costs associated with them. Overall, the alliance and its members were confronted with domestic political constraints, therefore limiting policy choices. The poliheuristic bias may have played a larger role in countries such as France and Germany either because of economic interdependency and/or desire to maintain a close relationship. The Netherlands also fell victim to the poliheuristic bias, fearing the domestic costs of escalation in terms of defence spending and public support for policies that could harm the Dutch economy.

From our interviews, it appears that domestic public support and the costs associated with supporting Ukraine in effect played a role in Western official perceptions and decisions in the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine. As related by a senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official:

543 David J. Brulé, 'Explaining and Forecasting Leaders' Decisions: A Poliheuristic Analysis of the Iran Hostage Rescue Decision', *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 110–11.

544 Kai Oppermann, 'Delineating the Scope Conditions of the Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decision Making: The Noncompensatory Principle and the Domestic Salience of Foreign Policy1', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10, no. 1 (2014): 37–39, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2012.00182.x.

545 Jonathan W. Keller and Yi Edward Yang, 'Leadership Style, Decision Context, and the Poliheuristic Theory of Decision Making: An Experimental Analysis', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Los Angeles, CA) 52, no. 5 (2008): 706–8, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708320889.

546 Karl DeRouen and Christopher Sprecher, 'Initial Crisis Reaction and Poliheuristic Theory', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* (Thousand Oaks, CA) 48, no. 1 (2004): 66, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002703260271.

547 Mintz, 'How Do Leaders Make Decisions?', 6; Brandon J. Kinne, 'Decision Making in Autocratic Regimes: A Poliheuristic Perspective', *International Studies Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (2005): 122–23.

548 Brulé, 'Explaining and Forecasting Leaders' Decisions', 104–5.

> "*Of course, an important part for politicians is simply public support, apart from what you think as a subject matter expert. Yes, that has to be there. And that means that we have to be much more open about what we see. I think that is an important lesson. Because that creates more support and with it more options for action.*"[549]

Before the invasion of Ukraine, however, public support for Ukraine was lacking. Across the alliance, political leaders faced a variety of domestic political constraints. In France, the cost of cutting economic ties with Russia was deemed more salient than a potential threat to Ukraine, according to a high-ranking French military official:

> "*They probably did not care at all, by the way, because it was too far away again from the concern at this time in France. There were so many economic links with Russia that it was totally insane to think about a war against Russia. Actually, before the conflict, nobody cared about Ukraine in Europe in general.*"[550]

"There were so many economic links with Russia that it was totally insane to think about a war against Russia."

As a result, during wargames, French officials and experts did not consider a full-scale invasion as the most likely and significant scenario. A high-ranking French military official noted: "*[All experts] thought that it would be very unlikely that there would be a large-scale invasion of Ukraine.*"[551]

For Germany too, an escalating conflict would have come with high domestic costs. As recalled by a high-ranking German official:

> "*There was a very strong economic lobby especially in the industry sector, especially on gas. Preparations on Nord Stream were underway. After the joint statement with the US on Nord Stream, the cost calculation to switch sources led to very nervous economists.*"[552]

The difficulty that Germany faced was witnessed by the allies as explained by a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

> "*These changes for them are so overwhelming. They lose cheap energy. If this decoupling with China goes on, they lose a market to explore in. The European Union is not what it was. All these things together, if you think back, they wanted to maintain.*"[553]

In the Netherlands, the government worried about potential escalation with Russia, which would require new economic choices, such as increasing the defence budget. As a high-ranking NATO military official noted, escalation with Russia would *"necessitate more investment in armed forces."*[554] Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a January 2022 Dutch survey also showed that while 81% of the population worried about Russian aggression, economic concerns led to a divided stance on responding forcefully, especially regarding energy imports from Russia.[555] Domestic costs and public opinion were therefore central in Dutch policies and further influenced Dutch threat assessment and policy response.

549 Interview 15
550 Interview 27
551 Interview 23
552 Interview 43
553 Interview 7
554 Interview 26
555 Fondapol, 'Freedoms at Risk'.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian government also seemed to have been affected by the poliheuristic bias. Paraphrasing a Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the economic aspect played a crucial role: Zelensky was highly focused on removing oligarchs and encouraging Western businesses to invest in the country. The official noted that threat perception posed a major obstacle to economic development and that Zelensky addressed this issue publicly. [556] The official also recalled some of his Ukrainian colleagues agreeing with this view privately, while others did not.

This position also influenced Western allies' threat perception, according to a former senior NATO official:

> "*I think to a degree, the response by Zelensky created some doubts in the minds of some Western allies. Because you hear what Zelensky is saying: 'Calm down with this, discussion about an imminent invasion is causing problems internally. I don't want to raise the alarms yet.'*"[557]

"Domestic political restraints thus inhibited Western decision-makers from fully recognising the likelihood of a Russian invasion."

A former senior US Department of Defense official suggested that Russia made shrewd use of the poliheuristic bias in European political leaders:

> "*Russia had a lot of coercive cards to play too, with Europe. And you had a new government in Germany, you had upcoming elections in France. NATO in better shape than it was under Donald Trump but still a little wobbly, especially coming out of Afghanistan.*"[558]

According to a high-ranking French military official, the Russians probably *"thought that especially the Europeans were too dependent on Russia to contest and to dispute anything. So, in particular we were prisoners of our energy dependencies on Russia."*[559]

Domestic political restraints thus inhibited Western decision-makers from fully recognising the likelihood of a Russian invasion. Acknowledging this probability would have created the need to provide significant financial and military support to Ukraine, which Western public opinion might not have been ready for at that time. Through a process of poliheuristic decision-making, the costly possibility of an actual invasion was therefore excluded from the decision set.

10.5. **Representativeness Heuristic**

Before the invasion of Ukraine, Western experts and policymakers believed that if Russia were to invade Ukraine, it would do so in a limited fashion similar to its invasion of Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014). Additionally, even when considering a full-scale invasion, the expert and policymaking community believed Russia's military to be *"far superior"* to the Ukrainian armed forces.[560] As it turned out, Russia did attempt a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and contrary to the belief that Kyiv would fall within three days, the Ukrainian military successfully repelled the invasion and continued to sustain a defence in the years that followed. The latter

[556] Interview 1

[557] Interview 3

[558] Interview 9

[559] Interview 23

[560] Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, 'How Do the Militaries of Russia and Ukraine Stack Up?', Council on Foreign Relations, 2 April 2022, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-do-militaries-russia-and-ukraine-stack.

misjudgement of Russian and Ukrainian capabilities negatively affected the West's willingness to provide Ukraine with additional military aid in the lead-up to the invasion.[561] In France for instance, as mentioned earlier, officials only discussed military support in the aftermath of an invasion and in the context of supporting Ukrainian resistance. Thus, the perceived likelihood of a successful full-scale invasion was biased by salient stereotypes of Russian intent and the military capabilities of both countries.

Based on foundational experiments, Tversky and Kahneman introduced this phenomenon as the representativeness heuristic, which prompts individuals to evaluate the likelihood of an event based on how much it resembles a mental image based on stereotypes that are formed in the mind. Under uncertainty, the heuristic simplifies decision-making by replacing analytical evaluations of probability with judgements based on similarity.[562] While this shortcut can facilitate swift decision-making, it may bias threat perception because it leads individuals to copy-paste impressions from one case to another and neglects statistical evidence such as base rates.[563] For instance, the heuristic may lead decision-makers to stereotype adversaries' intent based solely on a resemblance to previous cases, instead of relying on factual data that could inform, for example, the likelihood of violent action.[564] It is related to but distinct from the availability heuristic, because the representativeness heuristic emphasises overreliance on superficial characteristics and similarities, as a result distorting, among others, risk assessments.[565]

Under uncertainty, the heuristic simplifies decision-making by replacing analytical evaluations of probability with judgements based on similarity.

Psychologically, the representativeness heuristic operates on pattern-matching between cues from the observed environment and stored mental prototypes. The heuristic replaces analytical reasoning based on factual information with the application of stereotypes to observed actors and actions.[566] Building on Kahneman and Tversky's original experiments, recent experimental research has revealed how politicians overestimate policy outcomes due to biased judgements based on similarity to previous successful policies.[567] Additionally, simulations have revealed that when making tactical decisions under time pressures and conditions of uncertainty, military officers neglected baseline threat data in favour of representative but unreliable cues.[568] Similarly, Janice Gross Stein describes how British Prime Minister Anthony Eden stereotyped Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser as a dictator similar to Mussolini and Hitler, leading him to overestimate the threat posed by Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal.[569]

561 Bettina Renz, 'Western Estimates of Russian Military Capabilities and the Invasion of Ukraine', *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 3 (2024): 219–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2253359.

562 Tversky and Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', 1124.

563 Robert Jervis, 'Representativeness in Foreign Policy Judgments', *Political Psychology* 7, no. 3 (1986): 487–88, https://doi.org/10.2307/3791253.

564 Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 252.

565 Sjoerd Stolwijk, 'The Representativeness Heuristic in Political Decision Making', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2019), 9–11, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.981.

566 Daniel Kahneman and Shane Frederick, 'Representativeness Revisited: Attribute Substitution in Intuitive Judgment', in *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment*, ed. Dale Griffin et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808098.004; Lewend Mayiwar et al., 'Revisiting Representativeness Heuristic Classic Paradigms: Replication and Extensions of Nine Experiments in Kahneman and Tversky (1972)', *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, n.d., 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/17470218241255916.

567 Sjoerd Stolwijk and Barbara Vis, 'Politicians, the Representativeness Heuristic and Decision-Making Biases', *Political Behavior* 43, no. 4 (2021): 1427–29, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09594-6.

568 Bruce M. Perrin et al., 'Decision Making Bias in Complex Task Environments', *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting* 37, no. 16 (1993): 1119, https://doi.org/10.1177/154193129303701617.

569 Stein, 'Building Politics into Psychology', 252.

10.5.1. **The Representativeness Heuristic and the War in Ukraine**

The representativeness heuristic influenced Western decision-making in two distinct ways in the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine. First, policymakers regarded a hybrid operation or a small-scale invasion at most, more likely because these came most easily to mind based on previous Russian military operations, discounting the likelihood of a full-scale conventional invasion. Thus, for policymakers expecting only a limited incursion into Ukraine, the 2021–2022 Russian buildup was interpreted through the lens of these examples. This form of pattern recognition led to what can be named the "N+1 fallacy": the belief that each crisis will resemble the last, with only minor escalation. [570] As a result, many overlooked clear deviations from previous behaviour, such as the scale of the troop mobilisation, logistical preparations like blood supplies, and the December 2021 demarche to NATO. These elements pointed not to another hybrid operation, but to large-scale war. However, the prevailing assumptions made it harder for decision-makers to register the shift in Russian intent. A high-ranking French military official recalls how during a tabletop exercise in early February, a full-scale invasion was not part of the most likely scenarios: *"[Experts] thought that it would be very unlikely that there would be a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the kind of invasion we ended up with."*[571]

Stereotypes based on previous Russian military action led Western decision-makers to believe the most likely scenarios to consist of hybrid or small-scale military operations.

The official also notes how this belief about a Russian preference for hybrid or small-scale operations persisted within the broader expert community:

> "*I remember that we organised a meeting with wise experts, so very well-informed and wise experts coming from the civilian society, not military experts, but researchers, people coming from the university and who knew very well the post-Soviet world, Russia and Ukraine. And well, all of them thought that it would be very unlikely that there would be a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the kind of invasion we ended up with. So it was thought that Russia would retain a preference for hybrid warfare, so below the threshold of conflict, and could probably launch kind of a new "fait accompli", but not a large-scale invasion, definitely.*"[572]

Similarly, the Dutch government compared the Russian buildup of military troops in 2021-2022 to previous crises that ended up in small-scale invasions, according to a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

> "*We were surprised that it would be a full-scale invasion like that. Because, of course, we were informed about massing of troops and exercise and stuff like that. Stuff like that had happened before and also stuff like the rhetoric had happened before. So that something would have happened, yes. We would have expected that, but we were expecting more something like cutting off a bit more of the salami slicing.*"[573]

Stereotypes based on previous Russian military action led Western decision-makers to believe the most likely scenarios to consist of hybrid or small-scale military operations. The representativeness heuristic, thus, directly influenced Western threat perception by limiting the perceived likelihood of a full-scale invasion.

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570 Heuser, *Flawed Strategy*.

571 Interview 23

572 Interview 23

573 Interview 7

At the same time, and seemingly at odds with that first assessment, in case of such a large-scale conventional war, Western decision-makers also overestimated Russian capabilities while underestimating Ukrainian capabilities. This judgement played a clear role in NATO allies' assessments and understanding of the crisis. At NATO HQ, officials underrated the ability of Ukrainian forces to defend themselves against what they expected to be an over-powering onslaught by a modernised Russian military. The representativeness bias was a recurrent presence in Dutch and French assessments as well as in American evaluations of the course of a campaign. While French officials took their cue from previously successful Russian operations, Dutch officials based their analyses on the Ukrainian perception that the country would not be capable of resisting Russian forces.

"And the overall assessment was that there was no way for Ukraine to be able to defend itself without massive direct implication from the West."

It was not limited to these three governments, however. Throughout the entire alliance, Western policymakers believed that if Russia were to invade Ukraine, it would quickly succeed in taking over the entire country, as related by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

> "*The overall assessment at that time, shared by all allies including in Washington, was that this war, if it happened, would be a kind of blitzkrieg from Russian forces. And the overall assessment was that there was no way for Ukraine to be able to defend itself without massive direct implication from the West. Which was just like we were saying before, absolutely not an option on the table.*"[574]

US officials shared similar assessments, as admitted by a former senior US Department of Defense official:

> "*On the military side [...], the best case we anticipated was that the Russians would actually topple the government in Ukraine relatively quickly and then they would be beset by a long-standing mix of civil uprising and insurgency. Essentially we projected Iraq onto Ukraine.*"[575]

A former high-ranking NATO military official concurred, observing:

> "*There was an overestimation of Russian military capability, its competence, its ability to overwhelm the Ukrainian defence and its progress. All that was overestimated. That was a surprise." [...] The Russian modernisation did not end up in creating this juggernaut of military capability that people expected.*"[576]

The overestimation of Russian capabilities was based, among others, on Russia's military involvement around the world.

In France, even though Russia was first mostly perceived as a localised threat bound to the context of Crimea, a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official underlined Russia's military involvement in other regions. Paraphrasing the French official, Russia's expanding role and influence in Syria, the Middle East and Africa progressively turned into a wider threat affecting French and European interests. [577] Similarly, the US based their assessments on Russia's previous force projections. As one former senior US government official recalled:

574 Interview 29
575 Interview 9
576 Interview 3
577 Interview 30

"[*US intelligence on Russian capabilities] was mostly based on the number of years when the Russians had elite counter-insurgency forces in the Middle East*."[578]

The representativeness heuristic also led policymakers around Europe to underestimate Ukrainian capabilities. Across the NATO alliance, a senior NATO official recalled that the widespread belief was also that *"Ukraine was going to kind of... lose directly."*[579] As noted by a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official: *"That is also because we underestimated Ukraine. They had learned a lot since 2014*."[580] A high-ranking NATO military official agrees, noting that *"The size of troops assembled at the Russian and Ukrainian sides gave the idea that the Ukrainians would not survive."*[581] Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, it was the general assessment that Ukraine would not be able to hold up a strong resistance and that an invasion would result in asymmetric warfare against occupying forces.[582] Paraphrasing another senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, "*Even Zelensky doubted that Ukraine could resist.*"[583] These accounts suggest that Western estimates of the balance of power between Russia and Ukraine certainly shaped their expectation of the potential impact of military aid to Ukraine. As shared by a former senior UK official, Western officials believed Ukrainian forces would be outnumbered by Russian troops: "*People's concept is probably more of a war of liberation-style, resistance to a massive military force*."[584]

"That is also because we underestimated Ukraine. They had learned a lot since 2014."

Furthermore, according to a high-ranking Dutch military official, Russia may itself have fallen victim to the representativeness heuristic too, overestimating its own military capabilities while underestimating Ukrainian resolve:

> "*I think perhaps not their strength, but the way they conducted their invasion. It was, in hindsight, looking at the way they did it not a very smart way of doing it. So, I think they underestimated the resistance and for that they made a too simple plan. It did not work. And that is why we have seen the long queues of vehicles.*"[585]

The representativeness heuristic led Western policymakers to sustain salient stereotypes about Russian military superiority. Throughout the alliance, it was widely believed that if Russia would invade Ukraine, it would overwhelm the country within days. Had policymakers perceived a more balanced power dynamic between the two countries, the West may have provided more military aid to Ukraine. In this context, the representativeness heuristic reinforced the poliheuristic bias discussed earlier. Due to the representativeness bias, the capability gap between Russia and Ukraine was perceived to be of such magnitude that addressing it was considered politically unpalatable and consequently disregarded as a policy option.

578 Interview 25
579 Interview 2
580 Interview 7
581 Interview 26
582 Interview 30
583 Interview 1
584 Interview 28
585 Interview 11

10.6. **Groupthink**

Dominant narratives about the unlikelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine might have prevented the expression of contradictory opinions, biasing collective threat perception. In political and bureaucratic decision-making, individuals find themselves (un)consciously conforming to organisational norms out of emotional, social, and practical needs to belong to the group.[586] As a result, interpretations of Russian behaviour that clashed with dominant organisational narratives may have been suppressed. Group dynamics could have motivated individuals who considered an invasion to be likely to remain silent, because they expected their opinion to be considered outrageous by the dominant group.

Individuals find themselves (un) consciously conforming to organisational norms out of emotional, social, and practical needs to belong to the group.

In his seminal work *Victims of Groupthink*, Irving Janis described this process of groupthink as "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action", asserting that "Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing and moral judgement that results from in-group pressures."[587] These in-group dynamics result in biased threat perception by triggering self-censorship, overestimating the group's competence and morality, and suppressing dissent from the group norm.[588] Especially under external pressure to make quick decisions, individuals are prone to ignore or suppress dissenting opinions, favouring dominant in-group norms instead. This tendency is particularly prevalent in hierarchical decision-making environments such as the military or government bureaucracies.[589] In these contexts, hierarchical pressures may compel individuals to self-censor themselves out of fear for the judgment of their superiors. This accountability bias leads policymakers to only propose analyses and policy options that they consider to align with dominant leadership beliefs.[590]

Groupthink is grounded in social identity theory, which argues that individuals internalise a strong in-group identity and suppress dissent to maintain perceived group unity and status, especially when faced with an external threat.[591] In addition to this process of internalisation, groupthink can operate through a process of compliance. Particularly in hierarchical settings, individuals with deviant ideas and opinions may conform to organisational norms out of fear for reputational harm or punitive consequences.[592] Importantly, groupthink can also occur between interconnected groups responsible for crisis response, including military alliances.[593] Statistical and comparative analyses of crisis decision-making have found proof of Janis' original theory, but mainly stress the importance of impartial leadership styles

586 Michael A. Hogg and Amber M. Gaffney, 'Group Processes & Intergroup Relations', in *Stevens' Handbook of Experimental Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience*, 3rd edn, ed. Sharon L. Thomson-Schill and John T. Wixted (2018), 4:9–11, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119170174.epcn414.

587 Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 9.

588 Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 197–98.

589 Hogg and Gaffney, 'Group Processes & Intergroup Relations', 9.

590 Jennifer S. Lerner and Philip E. Tetlock, 'Accounting for the Effects of Accountability', *Psychological Bulletin* (US) 125, no. 2 (1999): 264–65, https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.255.

591 Marlene E. Turner et al., 'Threat, Cohesion, and Group Effectiveness: Testing a Social Identity Maintenance Perspective on Groupthink', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63, no. 5 (1992): 794–95, 1993-09555-001, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.63.5.781.

592 Clark McCauley, 'The Nature of Social Influence in Groupthink: Compliance and Internalization', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (US) 57, no. 2 (1989): 250–52, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.57.2.250.

593 Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 99–100.

and organised patterns of group conduct to prevent its occurrence.[594] Groupthink has, for example, been argued to have influenced the US' decision to escalate the Korean War in 1950 and to invade Iraq in 2003.[595] Similarly, a case study of France's defeat by Germany in 1940 attributes its poor military preparedness to groupthink within the French General Staff. Under the influence of centralised hierarchical leadership, the French military omitted conflicting information, missed major innovations and failed to question major assumptions.[596]

10.6.1. **Groupthink and the War in Ukraine**

Overall, there was a certain amount of groupthink present in the policy debates in the countries under consideration, including and especially in the French and Dutch contexts. In France, distrust of US intelligence shaped assessments and officials felt compelled to follow the president's diplomatic approach. In the Netherlands, officials also felt pressured not to mention upsetting interpretations, which was fuelled by the belief that finding a compromise with Russia was possible. Only in the UK, groupthink was identified and mitigated in higher levels of government.

The US was hesitant to float military policy options within NATO, fearing backlash from the member states.

Interviews with senior political and military decision-makers from various NATO member states provide some evidence for groupthink in the pre-invasion phase of the war in Ukraine. For example in France, the bureaucracy felt the president's desire to find a diplomatic solution for the crisis. As related by a high-ranking French military official: *"There was the pressure from the president that was very important as well. The political pressure, the political attempt to discuss, to keep the dialogue open with Putin till the last moment."*[597] In a different case, a former senior US Department of Defense official noted how the US was hesitant to float military policy options within NATO, fearing backlash from the member states:

> "*Part of the challenge of keeping the allies on the side is that had we signalled that we would fight WWIII over Ukraine, that would have started an immediate fight within NATO over that proposition.*"[598]

A senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official also reflected on the US position and influence on European states with regard to response options:

> "*I would say that with the US saying very clearly from the very beginning that there would be no military options for the United States, it has obviously coloured all the European discussion on this, and nobody has ever imagined a kind of military option.*"[599]

A high-ranking French military official suggested that dominant organisational beliefs about the trustworthiness of American intelligence also influenced French threat perception: "*The*

[594] Philip E. Tetlock et al., 'Assessing Political Group Dynamics: A Test of the Groupthink Model', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 63, no. 3 (1992): 418–19, 1993-01379-001, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.63.3.403; Mark Schafer and Scott Crichlow, 'Antecedents of Groupthink: A Quantitative Study', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 3 (1996): 427–29.

[595] Dina Badie, 'Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror: Explaining US Policy Shift toward Iraq', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no. 4 (2010): 277–96, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2010.00113.x; Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 50–74.

[596] David Ahlstrom and Linda C. Wang, 'Groupthink and France's Defeat in the 1940 Campaign', *Journal of Management History* 15, no. 2 (2009): 167–74, https://doi.org/10.1108/17511340910943804.

[597] Interview 27

[598] Interview 9

[599] Interview 29

bias is very strong, probably stronger than we think in the military, against what the Americans can say or can think."[600] The failure of US intelligence during the Iraq war still influences European appraisals of its intelligence. Paraphrasing a former high-ranking Dutch military official, the reluctance of the Germans and French to trust American intelligence stems from the Iraq War, and this issue still lingers, particularly between the French and the Americans.[601] In this context, groupthink suggests that individuals with similar beliefs to the Americans might have withheld their opinions, to avoid being associated with the 'untrustworthy' out-group. A high-ranking French military official also observed that this was reinforced by the Ukrainian's disbelief about the invasion:

> "*Despite the fact that American intelligence was very explicit, and American intelligence was very categorical about the imminence of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, we didn't think much of it, especially because the Ukrainian authorities themselves also said that they didn't believe in such [...] large-scale invasion. For them, it was very unlikely.*"[602]

"Do not self-censor, be scarier, give him the scariest option that you can find. Because he is going to draw the line somewhere, he is not going to say yes to everything."

According to a high-ranking NATO military official, Dutch ministerial bureaucracies have become increasingly preoccupied with protecting their minister's public image, constraining the expression of contradictory ideas:

> "*A culture has emerged long ago in the Ministry of Defence and perhaps at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs too of 'don't rock the boat'. Because there are a lot of other priorities and questions of political feasibility. Especially that last one is strong: what can a minister get away with? And how would they be perceived if they would say this or that?*"[603]

Similarly, a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official shared their fruitless attempts to change dominant beliefs about relations with Russia.[604] Paraphrasing this official, there were still individuals within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who believed compromise should be reached with Russia; that Germany simply needed to engage in dialogue and find a middle ground. But, as argued by the official, a common ground could not be found with Russia, and this has been argued for thirty years now, especially by those familiar with Eastern Europe. Yet, many people are still uncomfortable with this reality.

In the UK too, groupthink initially limited the policy options presented to higher levels of government, according to a high-ranking UK military official: *"So when we provided our options to the military three-star, we definitely took things off the table thinking, well, he's never going to go for that. And even if he did go for it, he'd never sign up for that."*[605] The bias was mitigated, however, by said three-star general, continues the same official:

> "*The first bit of feedback that he gave us was: I can see that you have taken things off the table, put them back on, put everything on the table. Do not self-censor, be scarier, give him the scariest option that you can find. Because he is going to draw the line somewhere, he is not going to say yes to everything. So if you provided him with things that you think are sensible, he's going to turn something off that is sensible. So give him something that isn't.*"[606]

600 Interview 27
601 Interview 19
602 Interview 23
603 Interview 35
604 Interview 6
605 Interview 16
606 Interview 16

Some evidence is found for groupthink dynamics across the alliance. Hierarchical pressures, alliance dynamics and the desire to conform to dominant beliefs about relations with Russia restrained individuals within bureaucracies and alliance members to float contradictory or unconventional ideas.

10.7. **Self-deterrence**

Discussions about Western responses to Russia's aggression have consistently featured fears of escalation. Before the invasion, and continuing ever since, the impact of weapon deliveries on escalatory dynamics between Russia and NATO has received ample consideration.[607] In the months leading up to the invasion, many commentators drew attention to the escalatory risks associated with weapons deliveries, suggesting that diplomatic strategies would be more appropriate.[608] Thus, despite the contributions of weapons deliveries to Ukrainian deterrence against Russia, Western decision-makers were concerned about provoking a Russian reaction. It could well be argued that this constituted self-deterrence, where decision-makers refrain from a course of action out of fear for further escalation by the adversary. Russia may have been further encouraged by the P5 nuclear powers' January 2022 joint statement that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."[609] While meant to reassure the world, this could be interpreted, albeit in a speculative fashion, by the Kremlin's leadership as giving Russia a freer hand in conventional escalation, as it only reinforced self-deterrence by stipulating Western limits.[610]

Despite the contributions of weapons deliveries to Ukrainian deterrence against Russia, Western decision-makers were concerned about provoking a Russian reaction.

According to Jeffrey H. Michaels, Robert Jervis was among the first to pay academic attention to the concept of self-deterrence. Jervis noted how "states can successfully deter others unintentionally or unknowingly. Because actors can perceive things that are not there, they can be deterred by figments of their imagination–'self-deterrence' if you will."[611] Self-deterrence, thus, refers to a situation in which a country deters itself from pursuing a course of action, out of fear for negative consequences it conceives for itself, irrespective of explicit threats made by an adversary.[612] Self-deterrence is rooted in individuals' risk propensity: the level of risk they are willing to take in decision-making. An individual is considered risk-averse if they prefer a certain outcome over a riskier one, even when the riskier option has an equal or higher expected value.[613] This risk attitude or propensity is influenced by both individual personality characteristics as well as the situational context in which a decision is made.[614] Prospect theory, for example, proposes that individuals will generally be more risk-averse

607 Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro, *Could U.S. Weapons Assistance to Ukraine Lead to Russian Escalation?*, RAND, 1 August 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2022/08/could-us-weapons-assistance-to-ukraine-lead-to-russian.html.

608 Agnieszka Nimark, 'Putin's "Red Line" over Ukraine: A New Test of European and Transatlantic Resolve', *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, December 2021, https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/putins-red-line-over-ukraine-new-test-european-and-transatlantic-resolve.

609 'Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races', The White House, 3 January 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/.

610 We thank Beatrice Heuser for this observation.

611 Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', 14.

612 Jeffrey H. Michaels, 'Rethinking the Relevance of Self-Deterrence', *US Amry War College Quarterly: Parameters* 54, no. 1 (2024): 108–11, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3275.

613 Quattrone and Tversky, 'Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice', 720–21.

614 Paul Huth et al., 'System Uncertainty, Risk Propensity, and International Conflict among the Great Powers', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 3 (1992): 482–83.

when faced with potential gains and risk-seeking when trying to prevent potential losses.[615] The theory suggests that, not faced with direct losses themselves, Western policymakers showed risk-averse behaviour in their effort to support the Ukrainians. Fearing risks of further escalation, they effectively deterred themselves from taking more decisive action.

Preservation of the *status quo* is central to this phenomenon. When potential gains come with high risks of disrupting the *status quo*, states will opt to minimise these risks. If the *status quo* is threatened by potential losses, however, states seek to avert these losses while accepting higher risks to their actions.[616] Crucial in this process is the way potential gains and losses are framed. If a decision is not framed in terms of losses–a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine is not perceived as an existential threat to NATO–states will exhibit risk-averse behaviour.[617] In addition to framing effects, risk propensity is influenced by factors like age, gender and cultural variables.[618] A historical example of self-deterrence includes Britain's appeasement politics towards Germany in the 1930s. According to Robert Jervis, appeasement was driven by unfounded fears that Hitler intended to destroy London in the event of a world war, alongside overestimations of German air superiority.[619] Self-deterrence also played a role in the US' military plans for its invasion of North Vietnam. Military planners assumed the threat of a Chinese intervention based on its involvement in the Korean War and, consequently, initially limited military campaigns in scale and duration.[620] Lastly, Obama's moderate response to Russian cyber interference in the 2016 presidential elections may have constituted a form of self-deterrence. Fears of potential Russian retaliation may have constrained the US' response in terms of counterattacks, thereby weakening its deterrence-by-punishment posture, at least in the cyber domain.[621]

10.7.1. Self-deterrence and the War in Ukraine

Self-deterrence impacted officials' reasoning across different allies as it was seen that strong military support for the country militarily could have led to further escalation. Among case studies, NATO, the US, France, the Netherlands, and Germany were influenced by a self-deterrence logic, especially with regard to supporting Ukraine ahead of the invasion. For instance, Germany was initially opposed to any form of military support to avoid legitimising a Russian action. The US, France and the Netherlands followed the same reasoning, dismissing military support options in fear of further escalation.

Fears of escalation played a significant role in Western decision-making about military intervention and the provision of military aid to Ukraine in the pre-invasion phase of the war. As related by a senior NATO official: "*The potential for escalation was a significant consideration and a major topic of debate before the war began.*"[622] Decision-makers' low risk propensity led

615 Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk', *Econometrica* (Menasha, Wis) 47, no. 2 (1979): 279, https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185.

616 Jack S. Levy, 'Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems', *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992): 284–85, https://doi.org/10.2307/3791682.

617 Jack S. Levy, 'Loss Aversion, Framing, and Bargaining: The Implications of Prospect Theory for International Conflict', *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 17, no. 2 (1996): 183–85.

618 Levy, 'Prospect Theory and International Relations', 304–6.

619 Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', 14.

620 Michaels, 'Rethinking the Relevance of Self-Deterrence', 115.

621 'President Obama's Pursuit of Cyber Deterrence Ends in Failure', Council on Foreign Relations, 1 April 2017, https://www.cfr.org/blog/president-obamas-pursuit-cyber-deterrence-ends-failure.

622 Interview 13

them to overestimate Russia's reaction to the West supporting Ukraine. A former high-ranking NATO military official stated that:

> "*NATO continued to overestimate Russia's red lines, what their involvement might do and the Russian potential for response. That has been the trend. And that I think has led to the unsuccessful ability to deter it, compel it at all.*"[623]

Reflecting on how self-deterrence dynamics shaped NATO's response, a former senior US Department of Defense official noted:

> "*It is hard to deter when the victim is a partner and not a treaty ally. Because both credibility of intervention is lower, because you don't have this interdependence of commitments in quite the same way. And because of alliance dynamics of self-deterrence, of countries worrying of being entrapped in conflicts where they don't have existing treaty obligations.*"[624]

"NATO continued to overestimate Russia's red lines, what their involvement might do and the Russian potential for response."

Self-deterrence was also present in the US, where officials overestimated risks associated with the delivery of military aid. As noted by the previously quoted former US official:

> *"There was a debate about whether the US flooding the aid to Ukraine might actually provide Putin either a justification or rationale to do something he had not quite yet decided he was going to do. Whether it would look like we were being the aggressors, and it would help shape Putin's narrative around why Putin had to go into Ukraine and 'secure Russia from Ukraine'.*"[625]

In France too, decision-makers feared that providing military aid to Ukraine would create the pretext for a Russian invasion. According to a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, providing substantial military support to Ukraine prior to the invasion might have been perceived at the time as creating the conditions for the war to actually start.[626] Another high-ranking French military official added that:

> "*We were probably afraid of Russian reactions. We were dissuaded by Russia to provide weapons to Ukraine and to have indirect support to Ukraine through weapons. And also to have direct support to Ukraine through troops on the ground.*"[627]

A senior Dutch Ministry of Defence official illustrated how this process of self-deterrence plays a role in every new instance of decision-making: *"This was about training officers, quite a major thing. Already at that point we had the discussion about whether it would lead to escalation or de-escalation and deterrence."* [628] Later, relatively close to the actual invasion, the official recalled they *"had an in hindsight quite surreal discussion, internally, about whether those sniper rifles were offensive or defensive weapons. [...] For what will the weapons be used? Defence, or can you also use it for offence? And what risks arise for the Netherlands if we are going to do this?"*[629]

623 Interview 3
624 Interview 9
625 Interview 9
626 Interview 30
627 Interview 23
628 Interview 15
629 Interview 15

Similarly, a high-ranking German political official noted how strengthening Ukraine's deterrence was not an option to them before the invasion:

> "*At the same time there was simply a difference. Would Germany defend Poland? Yes. And Ukraine? No, because that is a different story. It was very much a dissuasive policy towards Russia and not really deterrent.*"[630]

The same official adds that in hindsight, *"a deterrent element would have to come in far earlier. And that it comes with risks of escalation which is a red line for us."*[631]

In the UK, dynamics of self-deterrence played a lesser role, according to a former senior UK official:

> "*That [fear of escalation] was present and we went through it with the debate on the NLAWs, but we put prior deterrence as more important than escalation, in principle.*"[632]

The interviews show how at many decision points, the potential escalatory risks arising from military support to Ukraine were considered. These considerations were influenced by decision-makers' level of risk propensity. Fearing inadvertent escalation, Western decision-makers deterred themselves from providing more extensive military aid to Ukraine.

630 Interview 43
631 Interview 43
632 Interview 28

11. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the lead-up to the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, psychological and cognitive biases played a critical role in shaping Western decision-makers' threat perceptions and subsequent responses to Russia. Policymakers across Europe and the US struggled to interpret Moscow's intentions and calibrate their responses accordingly. While the US and the UK governments were certainly clear-eyed about the possibility of a full-scale invasion, other governments, including those of France, Germany, and the Netherlands, were reluctant to recognise the severity of the threat. These different perceptions were shaped not only by their respective intelligence positions, relationship with Russia, and strategic priorities, but also by underlying biases that influenced perceptions and decisions at critical moments throughout the crisis. As a result, many policymakers discarded the likelihood of a large-scale conventional war, underestimated Ukraine's ability to resist, and were hesitant to take actions that in their view might provoke Russia and escalate the crisis.

What then explains the lack of urgency and the reluctance to respond, followed by the sudden, and quite dramatic turn around after the invasion of 24 February 2022? Policymakers found it extremely hard to envisage an event that ran counter to deeply ingrained assumptions which, it turned out, affected their perceptions and clouded their judgement. As one former senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official succinctly put it, "*For so long in the West [...] we have lived in such relative peace on our continent. It was just beyond imagination that anyone would be so stupid.*"[633] Intelligence that contradicted these long-held assumptions was dismissed. As a German official described: "*We were inclined to ignore it.*"[634] Even in the small circle of advisers of the British Prime Minister there was doubt about Putin's real intentions. As Boris Johnson recalled: "Three of the four [..] said that Putin was bluffing."[635]

This was despite the fact that according to all salient explanations of threat credibility–including reputation based on behaviour, core interests and capabilities–warning signs had been flashing red, and policymakers had ample reason to believe the threat was real.

Based on 44 interviews with high-level officials, this study demonstrates how psychological and cognitive biases led decision-makers to dismiss these flashing warning signs of Russian invasion–they were blinded by bias. Drawing on seminal and contemporary works exploring the role of biases in decision-making, threat perception and credibility in international security, this study shows how psychological and cognitive biases influenced Western decision-makers' threat perception, leading policymakers to discard available intelligence and indicators for a credible threat against Ukraine, and informing, on balance, overall cautious responses. At the same time, decision-makers and policymakers overestimated Russia's military capability while underestimating Ukraine's ability to defend itself. This was more than just a failure of analytics, it was a failure of imagination. On the basis of the evidence presented in

633 Interview 41

634 Interview 43

635 Johnson, *Unleashed*, 534

this study, it is no exaggeration to say that policymakers were blinded by bias. This is reflective, it must be added, of a wider societal context in which national populations had a very hard time envisaging the gruesome reality of war.

Despite their clearly negative effects as demonstrated in the lead-up to the Ukrainian crisis, biases must be accepted as part and parcel of the human psychological make-up. In the words of Dominic Johnson, biases "are evolved, adaptive dispositions of human nature that were favoured by natural selection [...] Biases are not decision-making problems; they are elegant *solutions* to decision-making problems".[636] Biases are heuristic shortcuts that are inherent to human decision-making as a result of human evolution. They can, in effect, play a very useful role, as has been shown in our deep evolutionary past. Yet, in today's world, these biases also clearly have negative effects as demonstrated in the lead-up to the crisis. Biases cannot – and arguably should – not be entirely eliminated, but there are ways to address biases and to some extent mitigate their effects. For each of the seven biases found in this study, a literature review has been conducted identifying how to mitigate them. This review yielded a total of 3 general recommendations and 20 recommendations clustered by bias.

11.1. Mitigatory Measures per Bias: Recommendations

11.1.1. Availability Heuristic

Eliminating the availability heuristic in human perception is not only impossible but also unwise as the heuristic serves an important purpose. Yet there are a variety of measures that can be implemented to help policymakers imagine the possibility of events that do not immediately come to mind and expand the pool of scenarios they imagine. In order to overcome the availability heuristic bias, it is first and foremost essential to increase awareness of the availability bias and recognise the potential risks associated with it. Building on that, mechanisms that facilitate the consideration of hard-to-imagine scenarios need to be fostered, including through the establishment of multidisciplinary teams and dialogue with allies whose knowledge and history differ from our own national memory.

The availability heuristic bias was prevalent in German, US and French decision-making, amongst others, prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Germany interpreted the military buildup as a show of force and as an intimidation tactic, attributing it to usual activities and thus missing the actuality of the threat. Similarly, US and French policymakers viewed the situation as one of coercive diplomacy in the Minsk context. They could not imagine the possibility of war. Addressing the availability heuristic could have expanded the range of scenarios available to these policymakers, including the possibility of large-scale war in Europe.

[636] Johnson, *Strategic Instincts*, 291.

1. **Implement rare-risk training and education**
   Training and education can help individuals recognise and appreciate 'rare-risks', even those that they lack personal affinity with.[637] Since individuals respond to the information available to them, the way in which information is presented is of great significance. Less-imaginable scenarios that challenge existing perceptions must be presented in a clear and systematic manner.[638] Rare-risk and imagination training helps expand the range of imaginable scenarios by increasing awareness of the less-obvious scenarios and thus ensuring that these are considered.

2. **Form multidisciplinary teams**
   Decision-making and policy teams need to include individuals with a wider range of professional, disciplinary, cultural and personal backgrounds. Involvement of a diverse array of specialists including sociologists, political psychologists, and historians, alongside professionals with experience can help mitigate the availability heuristic. Their experiences and insights will help balance against blind spots, expand the range of scenarios considered, make the group more open towards new ideas, and improve decision-making.[639] The US' Tiger Team initiative is an example of a multidisciplinary team which was tasked with thinking through possible scenarios, responses and coercive threats to guide decision-making (even if it was tasked to prepare largely for the aftermath).

3. **Engage with allies to address gaps in national experiences**
   Engaging in dialogue with allies can reveal insights and perspectives that are otherwise overlooked. For example, Eastern European policymakers arguably had a deeper understanding of Russia due to their own experiences with Russia. Here, it is important to invest in cross-national confidence-building, in an effort to create the foundations for effective and meaningful dialogue and action in times of crisis. As the German case study has shown, distrust in the Five Eyes and American intelligence apparatus weighed heavily in European states' calculations on whether or not to act. Raising awareness of un-imaginable, un-desirable and therefore un-likely alternatives improves the ability of policymakers to imagine them as a real possibility in their assessments which is facilitated through closer interaction with allies.[640]

11.1.2. Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is the consequence of dismissing key intelligence that conflicts with preexisting ideas and beliefs, resulting in the dismissal, neutralisation and reframing of important signals. By relying on belief-supporting indicators and avoiding conflicting data and insights, threat and risk perceptions become faulty and fail to capture the reality of a situation.[641] In order to mitigate this bias, reforms are needed in the decision-making environment and process, allowing conflicting information to be duly considered at all levels. Specific measures include the fostering of environments conducive to open-thought and critical thinking, adapting information reporting through the chain to prevent the automatic dismissal

637 Pachur et al., 'How Do People Judge Risks', 326.

638 Raue and Scholl, 'The Use of Heuristics in Decision Making Under Risk and Uncertainty', 170–71.

639 David Rock and Heidi Grant, 'Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter', Harvard Business Review, 4 November 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter; Dianne J. Hall and Robert A. Davis, 'Engaging Multiple Perspectives: A Value-Based Decision-Making Model', *Decision Support Systems* 43, no. 4 (2007): 1588, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2006.03.004.

640 Hall and Davis, 'Engaging Multiple Perspectives', 1588; Tversky and Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', 1127.

641 Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*, 241.

of conflicting information, nurturing creative thinking and developing multidisciplinary intelligence products to avoid belief-confirming analyses. France, the Netherlands and Germany interpreted Russian actions through a biased lens of their own preexisting ideas and beliefs, most notably: the belief that diplomacy and compromise were still possible and the belief in *Wandel durch Handel* and *Ostpolitik* policies. Accordingly, important signals and intelligence were neutralised and the actors failed to capture the reality of the Russian threat. A structural approach to integrating critical and conflicting ideas in the decision-making process could have alleviated this cognitive bias by challenging dominant beliefs.

4. **Foster an environment conducive to critical thinking**
   Environments must be fostered in which ideas, opinions and criticisms, especially those against a dominant political narrative or conception, are allowed and taken seriously.[642] Encouraging critical thinking and discussion will help mitigate cognitive closure and discourse failure. Inviting challenging dialogue will contribute to a more complete picture of the reality and consequences of a possible threat, especially through dialogue in diverse groups. The establishment of a 'devil's-advocacy' group, specifically tasked with challenging generally accepted ideas and beliefs, not just within intelligence organisations but also within policy departments, is one mechanism to further this and improve decision-making.[643] A devil's advocacy group can formulate policy alternatives, aiding in the mitigation of the cognitive dissonance bias by stimulating and emphasising seemingly counter-intuitive analyses. Alternatively, red-teaming or premortem analyses can further act as means to routinise and institutionalise critical thinking; yielding different imaginations of possible developments and futures, especially when the use of artificial intelligence is integrated to generate more alternative scenarios and outcomes. Additionally, establishing anonymous feedback channels may provide a safe way to flag inconsistencies and (dominant narrative) biases in intelligence products or decision-making without fear of consequences.

5. **Adapt the information cycle to prevent automatic dismissal of conflicting information**
   To mitigate judgement bias in information processing, steps need to be taken to prevent the neutralisation and dismissal of information contradicting dominant perceptions. Ignoring conflicting information, as was the case in neutralising Five Eyes intelligence, leads to faulty threat perceptions because key signals are overlooked in favour of confirming existing beliefs. Typically, this occurs when individuals are unconsciously defending previous assessments or beliefs rather than processing conflicting information. To prevent this, information reporting can be structured in such a way that contradictory information is reported in the chain, while training can help policymakers and decision-makers to process contradictory information.[644] For instance, intelligence analysts should adapt their hypotheses to conflicting information and identify the "for" and "against" arguments for each of these hypotheses. This reasoning should be accessible to consumers in order for them to process information through their own policymaking perspective.[645] These reforms will help mitigate the cognitive dissonance bias as they would ensure that critical information is not ignored and will improve threat perception abilities.

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642 Hatlebrekke and Smith, 'Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure', 182.

643 Charles R Schwenk, 'Effects of Devil's Advocacy and Dialectical Inquiry on Decision Making: A Meta-Analysis', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 47, no. 1 (1990): 170–72, https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(90)90051-A.

644 Tetlock, 'Theory-Driven Reasoning About Plausible Pasts and Probable Futures in World Politics', 335.

645 Richards J. Jr. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999), 175.

6. **Nurture creative thinking and encourage the transmission of atypical information to decision-makers.**
   Instead of focusing training and education solely on developing high intelligence and communication skills that many organisations typically select for, the focus should be shifted to nurturing creative and novel thinking capabilities. This would create a "tolerance for ambiguity" among analysts and policy advisors, allowing them to be more open to atypical information and intelligence.[646] At its core, this will help prevent policymakers from dismissing key intelligence on the grounds of it not being in the realm of possibilities based on their own ideas and beliefs. Both groups must be trained and equipped to take advantage of controversy and challenges to preexisting understandings, thus allowing less-filtered information to reach the top decision-makers. Establishing an 'Atypical Signal Processing' unit would further support this reform.[647] On top of this, conducting strategic forecasting with undesirable alternatives will enable belief-conflicting forecasts to reach, and be considered by, policymakers, preventing strategic surprises.

11.1.3. Mirror Imaging

The mirror imaging bias refers to individuals projecting their own rationality and strategic thinking on their adversary, culminating in, for example, the downplaying of the possibility of war as this would be an irrational choice according to Western rationality. Mitigating the mirror imaging bias can only be achieved through the acknowledgement and dutiful consideration of other rationalities. This requires first and foremost recognition of one's own as well as one's adversary's unique rationality to accept 'irrational' outcomes, and the development of operational codes to understand an adversary's worldview.[648] It can also be helped along by the establishment of frameworks with both allies and adversaries to increase the predictability of actions. One of the products of Western rationality was the irrationality of war which, paired with the belief that Russia was seeking concessions rather than a large-scale war, impacted threat assessments and consequent actions of, among others, the US and France. Greater awareness and knowledge of Russia's strategic thinking might have prevented policymakers from projecting their own rationality onto Putin, increasing the chance of recognising the rationality of an invasion from a Russian perspective.

7. **Recognise the adversary's unique rationality to acknowledge the possibility of 'irrational' outcomes**
   It is important to avoid dismissing an adversary's actions as irrational, implying impulsivity and a lack of reasonability.[649] Instead, it should be recognised that the adversary operates under a different and unique rationality, transforming seemingly irrational decisions into realistic possibilities. By labelling an adversary as *strangely irrational*, one is also labelling the undesirable policy options available to that adversary as *impossible* based on one's own perception of what constitutes rationality and possibility; as was the case in asserting the irrationality and costly nature of war.[650] But, when the supposed 'irrationality' of another actor is conceptually understood as a 'different rationality', actions available to that actor become *possible* scenarios and therefore require being taken seriously in strategic forecasting and policy options evaluations.

646 Bar-Joseph and McDermott, 'Change the Analyst and Not the System', 128.

647 Bar-Joseph and McDermott, 'Change the Analyst and Not the System', 133.

648 Beatrice Heuser, 'Heisenberg's Uncertainty and Strategic Defence Analysis: Of Biases, (Ir)Rational Actors and Other Animals', *The RUSI Journal* 170, no. 2 (2025): 18, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2025.2474304.

649 Uriel Abulof, 'The Malpractice of "Rationality" in International Relations', *Rationality and Society* 27, no. 3 (2015): 358, https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463115593144; Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 402.

650 Bronfenbrenner, 'The Mirror Image in Soviet–American Relations: A Social Psychologist's Report', 72–74.

8. **Develop operational codes to understand adversaries' worldviews, rationalities and policy alternatives**

   The development of an operational code of an adversary can help limit the projection of one's own rationality and worldview onto another. An operational code refers to a conceptual framework of an adversary, capturing their psychology, doctrines, character, trends, beliefs, ideas and other influences on their behaviour and policy decisions. The operational code is cross-dimensional, taking into account their socio-economic, cultural, political and historical context, creating an instrument that can be used to read and predict their behaviour. Importantly, the operational code must be understood as "premises and beliefs about politics" and not misunderstood as mechanical "rules and recipes".[651] Sources for insight may include policy documents and government strategies, but may also include local films, newspapers and other cultural texts to gain a deeper insight into the adversary's way of life and way of thinking. Having access to an operational code helps to understand an adversary's rationale, worldview, interests and policy alternatives, thereby providing a more realistic and holistic understanding of adversarial objectives and actions. Through the use of operational codes, policymakers can better assess the adversary's signals and actions and help mitigate tendencies for mirror imaging. In operational codes, personal interactions should be facilitated and treated as additional sources of insight and information.[652] Personal interactions give insights into decision-making contexts and intelligence-signals, enhancing our capacity to interpret behaviour and anticipate actions.[653]

9. **Establish rationality frameworks with allies and adversaries to increase the predictability and clarity of actions**

   The establishment of rationality frameworks with allies and symbolic frameworks with adversaries can help enhance the predictability of actions and reduce uncertainty.[654] These frameworks define what does and does not constitute acceptable behaviour and make it easier to expect and comprehend how actors are likely to respond to signals and situations.[655] Adopting common conceptions of behaviour with allies will reduce misunderstanding and improve the ability to expect behaviour. With adversaries' symbolic frameworks–a grammar for communication–will help interpret their behaviour as they may provide a clearer understanding of signals and expected responses. However, an ally-based rationality framework can be exploited by adversaries, as was seen in the member-state collective defence orientation and priority of NATO.

11.1.4. Poliheuristic Bias

The effect of the poliheuristic bias causes decision-makers to leave politically unpalatable scenarios outside of the scope of consideration. This bias can be counterbalanced by putting all options on the table, diversifying the perspectives, and greater engagement with domestic actors to gain a comprehensive understanding of public opinion.[656] The poliheuristic bias

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651 Alexander L. George, *The "'Operational Code": A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making*, Memorandum RM-5427-PR (RAND Corporation, 1967), 196–97, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM5427.html.

652 Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*, 247.

653 Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*, 244–45.

654 Raymond Cohen, 'Threat Perception in International Crisis', *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (1978): 105–7, https://doi.org/10.2307/2149052.

655 Tim Sweijs and Samo Zilincik, *Cross Domain Deterrence and Hybrid Conflict*, HCSS Security (The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2019), 16–23, https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Cross-Domain-Deterrence-Final_0.pdf.

656 Mintz, 'The Decision to Attack Iraq'.

impacted the Netherlands' decision against providing pre-invasion support to Ukraine because of the expected domestic economic costs associated with escalation. Similarly, the pacifist culture and belief in interdependency peace-guarantees resulted in inaction in both Germany and amongst NATO analysts. Escalation, and war, were deemed politically unpalatable and thus deterred early involvement. Consideration of a broader range of policy dimensions and perspectives in decision-making might have reduced the influence of the poli-heuristic bias by offsetting the perceived costs associated with a single dominant dimension.

10. Clearly define and consider all dimensions against which policy alternatives are compared

After generating and analysing a wide range of policy options, it is important to clearly define and scope the dimensions used to assess these alternatives, especially when it comes to deeming an alternative 'unacceptable' or 'unpalatable'.[657] The adoption of a linear compensatory or dimension-based approach–referring to evaluating all policy alternatives against all dimensions–will prevent a policy alternative from being dismissed based on a single dimension.[658] While these dimensions will vary depending on the situation, they must be clearly defined in response to both domestic and international circumstances. Additionally, it is essential to assign weight to each dimension and to decide on how many dimensions a policy must fail before it is rejected.[659] The clear definition, scope, and thresholds of these dimensions shape the cost-and-benefit analyses and influence decisions at both the initial evaluation and final decision-making stages. This systematic approach will help mitigate the poliheuristic bias by ensuring that the decision-making process is transparent and consistent, preventing policy alternatives from being dismissed based only on a key policymaker's perception and assessment.

11. Diversify the perspectives that feed into decision-making to ensure a balanced assessment

A more diverse group of specialists should be involved in making assessments of the costs and benefits of policy options.[660] Involving different perspectives will balance against the 'top of the head phenomenon', which occurs when decision-making is based on few perspectives and simple thinking.[661] By diversifying the team and the dimensions used in evaluations, the poliheuristic bias is mitigated. Besides the decision-making process, engaging with diverse and alternative mind-sets–through, for example, debates, devil's advocate simulations, war gaming and joint-brainstorming–will train policymakers' thinking and reasoning skills.[662]

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657 Klaus Brummer and Kai Oppermann, 'Poliheuristic Theory and Germany's (Non-)Participation in Multinational Military Interventions. The Non-Compensatory Principle, Coalition Politics and Political Survival', *German Politics* 30, no. 1 (2021): 106–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2019.1568992; Alex Mintz, 'Foreign Policy Decision Making in Familiar and Unfamiliar Settings: An Experimental Study of High-Ranking Military Officers', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 1 (2004): 96–97.

658 Mintz, 'The Decision to Attack Iraq', 597; Mintz, 'Foreign Policy Decision Making in Familiar and Unfamiliar Settings', 98.

659 Brummer and Oppermann, 'Poliheuristic Theory and Germany's (Non-)Participation in Multinational Military Interventions. The Non-Compensatory Principle, Coalition Politics and Political Survival', 109.

660 DeRouen and Sprecher, 'Initial Crisis Reaction and Poliheuristic Theory', 57–58.

661 Oppermann, 'Delineating the Scope Conditions of the Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decision Making', 26; Shelley E. Taylor and Susan T. Fiske, 'Salience, Attention, and Attribution: Top of the Head Phenomena', in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Leonard Berkowitz, vol. 11 (Academic Press, 1978), https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60009-X.

662 Richards J. Jr. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999), 178, 181.

12. **Engage with domestic actors to gain a better understanding of public opinion and foreign policy-flexibility**
    Involving a broad range of domestic actors – such as local councils, NGOs, and various businesses – in foreign policy decision-making will help ensure that policymakers at least take domestic opinion into account.[663] On top of this, by engaging with domestic actors, the range of policy options available (especially on sensitive issues) and the costs the public is willing to bear becomes clear. This will allow for more realistic and socially acceptable foreign policy decision-making, mitigating the poliheuristic bias by understanding what alternatives are politically palatable and by holding decision-makers accountable to the public. Domestic audience-oriented communication strategies are key to gaining public support. However, it must always be noted that involving public opinion in foreign policy decision-making may have the adverse effect of adopting emotional decisions, creating an international perception of inconsistency, or further risks associated with making decisions without complete information.

11.1.5. Representativeness Heuristic

The representativeness heuristic can, amongst other things, lead to distorted capability and risk assessments. Mitigating the representativeness heuristic involves having a better understanding of the frequency and probability of events as well as a careful consideration of cases to reduce the risk of stereotyping. Especially to the French government, the notion of a full-scale invasion was not imaginable. French capability and risk assessments were based on previous Russian operations in the Middle East and Africa. This, in combination with a weak Ukrainian capability assessment, resulted in the lack of support and aid prior to the invasion. Improved, evidence-based assessments of capabilities and probabilities might have alleviated the effects of the representativeness heuristic, reducing the risk of stereotyping Russian and Ukrainian capabilities.

13. **Implement base-rate and regression analyses to improve judgements of probability**
    To improve decision-making, it is essential to highlight the importance of so-called base-rates or probabilities of an event occurrence.[664] In plain terms, if you'd roll a dice twice and land on a five both times, the probability (base-rate) of rolling a five a third time is again a one in six chance. These base-rates are often overshadowed by perceived trends, resulting in inaccurate expectations, for example in military capability assessments. Through a team of discipline specialists, a set of base-rates and regressions can be compiled and presented to the policymakers.[665] This approach ensures that all pivotal data is considered in evaluations, thus improving threat and capability assessments. The inclusion of base rates will reduce emphasis on confirmation bias by balancing against dominant narratives. In addition, this can also be combined with the development of a standardised bias checklist, used to ensure that policymakers consider the strengths and weaknesses of all actors and policy alternatives. As a check mechanism, this can prevent the overlooking of actors and can further ensure the evaluation of the base-rates and otherwise neglected facts.

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663 Oppermann, 'Delineating the Scope Conditions of the Poliheuristic Theory of Foreign Policy Decision Making', 27.

664 Kahneman and Frederick, 'Representativeness Revisited', 69; Philip E. Tetlock, 'Knowing the Limits of One's Knowledge', in *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 85, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400830312.

665 Jervis, 'Representativeness in Foreign Policy Judgments', 492.

14. Create multidisciplinary expert centres to enhance specific actor and country knowledge

The establishment of specialised country and actor expertise centres will deepen understanding of the context, capabilities and worldview of adversaries, all of which influence their policies and, in turn, shape ours.[666] These centres must involve multidisciplinary expertise, including language specialists and topic and regional experts. By providing a more multidisciplinary view, the expertise centres will help policymakers and analysts respond to all relevant factors–not just military or political considerations.[667] Moreover, these centres enable capability assessments that involve both material and immaterial factors, ensuring that policymakers' perceptions are based on a broad range of inputs.

11.1.6. Groupthink

Groupthink is the product of dominant narratives within bureaucracies and alliances preventing individuals from considering options that they expect to be considered outrageous by others or higher-ups in the hierarchy. Groupthink can be exacerbated when individuals perceive a (critical or dissenting) perspective as being at odds with the dominant organisational narrative. Consequently, they experience the need to self-censor potentially critical or dissenting thoughts because of the need to be considered as part of 'the group'.[668] To mitigate this bias, it is important to address hierarchical structures in decision-making and to encourage creative and critical thinking. Specific measures to accomplish this include creating non-hierarchical and multidisciplinary workgroups, encouraging creative and dissenting thoughts through a horizontal decision-making environment, removing the unanimity decision-making requirement in initial stages in the decision-making process and adopting internal mitigation mechanisms that relieve image-protection and top-down pressures. The combination of distrust in US intelligence and organisational pressures led to French and German policymakers following dominant organisational beliefs in diplomacy and compromise. Interestingly enough, in the UK the groupthink bias was internally mitigated through calls to present unfiltered policy options to the decision-makers, without omitting what is expected to be contrary to organisational beliefs and pressures. In other bureaucracies, similar efforts to reduce hierarchical pressures might have enabled dissenting views to reach higher-level decision-makers, reducing the effects of groupthink bias.

15. Create non-hierarchical multidisciplinary workgroups to foster critical thinking

Introducing small multidisciplinary discussion groups to interpret information independently, without the presence and influence of a key decision-maker or department, will serve as a step towards mitigating hierarchy-caused groupthink.[669] Discussion groups can include specialised teams, such as a devil's advocate team (responsible for challenging dominant narratives) or an operational code team (evaluating the behaviour of the actors from the perspective of the actor concerned). These groups should present their findings and proposals for broader deliberation. By initially excluding senior figures, discussions can take place in a freer and more open environment in which diverse perspectives can emerge without top-down pressures. While this approach does not fully eliminate all pressures, like in-group pressures, it does significantly reduce

666 Renz, 'Western Estimates of Russian Military Capabilities and the Invasion of Ukraine', 227–28.

667 James Hackett et al., 'If New Looks Could Kill: Russia's Military Capability in 2022', IISS, 15 February 2022, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2022/02/if-new-looks-could-kill-russias-military-capability-in-2022/; Masters and Merrow, 'How Do the Militaries of Russia and Ukraine Stack Up?'

668 Hogg and Gaffney, 'Group Processes & Intergroup Relations'.

669 Hogg and Gaffney, 'Group Processes & Intergroup Relations', 5.

the dominance of top-level leadership over the evaluation process, thus fostering critical thinking and mitigating the groupthink bias.

16. **Adopt a horizontal decision-making environment to encourage dissenting voices**
A horizontal decision-making environment can help reduce hierarchical pressures, thus allowing for open debate and the mitigation of the groupthink bias. Here, dissenting voices must be both encouraged and protected in order to prevent group conformity out of fear of repercussions.[670] Removing unanimity requirements in initial decision-making stages is one way to allow alternative viewpoints to have a greater chance of being heard and considered. This approach also reduces group polarisation, preventing extreme consensus decisions driven by in-group pressures instead of critical analysis. [671] Thus, by fostering an open, non-hierarchical and horizontal decision-making culture, decision-making will become more critical and resistant to the groupthink bias which can emerge in rigid hierarchical systems.[672]

17. **Adopt internal mitigation mechanisms to balance against image-protection and top-down pressures**
The worldview of policymakers significantly influences the decision-making process by shaping the dimensions and narratives that they prioritise. This can lead to groupthink and consequently defective processing and biased threat perceptions. To mitigate this effect, internal mechanisms must be introduced that balance against top-down influences and self-protective tendencies in policymaker groups. One way to achieve this is by actively engaging policymakers with critical and adversarial perspectives, ensuring that opposing perspectives are heard, considered and challenge the dominant narratives within the organisation.[673] Additionally, decision-making structures should incorporate face-saving mechanisms that safeguard against decision-making being based on self-protective tendencies (avoiding reputational and image damage).[674]

11.1.7. Self-deterrence

The self-deterrence bias refers to policymakers refraining from taking stronger action out of fear of this causing further escalation with the adversary. Central to this is the risk propensity of policymakers, their issue-framing and the desire to preserve the status quo, even in the wake of an adversary seeking to disrupt this. Thus, in an effort to mitigate the self-deterrence bias, attention must be given to risk-propensity and its effects on decision-making behaviour and on increasing actor-predictability which includes measures to foster more calculated risk-taking behaviour, attention to escalation risks and risks associated with inaction, challenges to dominant issue-framing, and the establishment of shared-expectations frameworks should be established to prevent decision-making hesitancy and to ensure that all policy alternatives aligned with the framework are given due consideration. The self-deterrence bias was reflected across the board: Germany avoided interference due to the desire to avoid legitimising Russian actions, the US over-estimated the risks associated with military support, and this culminated in a lack of support for Ukraine and the dismissing of military options

670 Tetlock et al., 'Assessing Political Group Dynamics', 418; Marlene E Turner and Anthony R Pratkanis, 'A Social Identity Maintenance Model of Groupthink', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 73, no. 2 (1998): 224, https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.1998.2757.

671 Hogg and Gaffney, 'Group Processes & Intergroup Relations', 7.

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673 Badie, 'Groupthink, Iraq, and the War on Terror', 293.

674 Turner and Pratkanis, 'A Social Identity Maintenance Model of Groupthink', 224.

in Germany, France and the Netherlands. The risks of involvement and escalation were perceived as too great, resulting in self-deterrence and inaction. Awareness of one's own risk-propensity and consideration of the risks associated with inaction might have reduced the influence of self-deterrence by reducing the perceived probability and severity of escalatory dynamics.

18. Address the risk-propensity of policy and decision-makers to foster calculated risk-taking

To ensure that decisions are based on cost-benefit calculations rather than fear-driven risk avoidance, institutional low risk aversion or other influences like cultural pacifism, policy and decision-makers must first understand and acknowledge their own risk-propensity.[675] This requires first and foremost awareness, which can be achieved through stress tests, worldview assessments, and participation in decision-making scenario exercises and war gaming.[676] These exercises will allow decision-makers to practice responding to high-stress scenarios in a calculated, rather than reactionary, manner, reducing the influence of risk aversion or unnecessary risk taking. Following these assessments, risk-management frameworks should be developed to ensure the inclusion of cost-benefit appraisals guiding decision-making. These frameworks can also account for the areas in which policymakers exhibit higher levels of avoidance or risk-taking. (This process should also be extended to intelligence analysts, ensuring that intelligence products do not exclude or emphasise certain analyses based on analyst risk-propensities.) Beyond structural tests and adjustments, psychological resilience training should be introduced into training decision-making. Techniques such as stress management will allow policymakers to maintain rationality in decision-making, preventing fear-driven thinking from undermining calculated decision-making. By introducing self-awareness assessments, structured frameworks and resiliency training, decision-making becomes more resistant to the self-deterrence bias.

19. Outline escalation risks and risks of inaction to challenge worst-case scenarios

To address the self-deterrence bias among policymakers and in decision-making, it is essential to introduce checks and models to challenge worst-case scenarios and to highlight the risks of both escalation and inaction. One approach would be to model both escalation and inaction risks in intelligence products and policy memos. Another possible strategy is to engage in alternative hypothesis testing. Through alternative hypothesis testing, intelligence analysts, critics, and devil's advocacy groups should be enabled to actively challenge the worst-case scenario of the inevitable escalation perspective. By questioning what is perceived as a 'gain' or 'cost' and offering alternative perspectives on different outcomes, policymakers are provided with a broader overview of potential scenarios.[677] Additionally, escalation ladder modelling should be employed to map potential adversary responses to different policy alternatives. Such detailed models, visualising possible areas of escalation, would offer policymakers a clearer picture of potential risks and the full range of potential outcomes. Finally, bias detection measures must be integrated into the analysis process. This will ensure that intelligence products available to policymakers are not heavily influenced by biases and will provide bias checks on policymakers.

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675 Paul A. Kowert and Margaret G. Hermann, 'Who Takes Risks? Daring and Caution in Foreign Policy Making', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 5 (1997): 611.

676 Jan Oliver Schwarz et al., 'Combining Scenario Planning and Business Wargaming to Better Anticipate Future Competitive Dynamics', *Futures* 105 (January 2019): 133, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2018.10.001.

677 Levy, 'Prospect Theory and International Relations', 291–92, 300.

20. Establish 'shared- expectations' to ensure all policy alternatives aligned with the common goal are considered

Mitigate the self-deterrence bias by creating clear 'shared-expectations' frameworks, at a national or multilateral level, that establish common goals.[678] These expectations and goals constitute clear objectives that policy decisions should seek to achieve, ensuring that all policy alternatives that align with these objectives are considered.[679] Additionally, this would prevent policymakers from hiding behind indecision and push them to act more decisively.

Table 4 below offers a summary of the 20 measures.

Table 4. Biases and mitigatory measures

Cognitive Bias	Description	Mitigation Measures
Availability heuristic	Policymakers had not experienced war: it was hard to imagine the possibility.	1. Implement rare-risk training and education. 2. Form multidisciplinary teams. 3. Engage with allies to address gaps in national experiences.
Cognitive dissonance	Policymakers dismissed key intelligence that conflicted with preexisting ideas and beliefs about engagement with Russia.	4. Foster an environment conducive to critical thinking. 5. Adapt the information cycle to prevent automatic dismissal of conflicting information. 6. Nurture creative thinking and encourage the transmission of atypical information to decision-makers.
Mirror imaging	Policymakers projected their own rationality and strategic thinking onto Russia: war is irrational from a Western perspective, therefore our opponent will think so too.	7. Recognise the adversary's unique rationality to acknowledge the possibility of 'irrational' outcomes. 8. Develop operational codes to understand adversaries' worldviews, rationalities and policy alternatives. 9. Establish rationality frameworks with allies and adversaries to increase the predictability and clarity of actions.
Poliheuristic bias	Policymakers preferred not to consider politically unpalatable situations that would come with high (domestic) costs.	10. Clearly define and consider the dimensions against which policy alternatives are compared. 11. Diversify the perspectives that feed into decision-making to ensure a balanced assessment. 12. Engage with domestic actors to gain a better understanding of public opinion and foreign policy-flexibility.
Representativeness heuristic	Policymakers overestimated Russia's capabilities on its recent successes in other types of conflicts and underestimated Ukrainian capabilities.	13. Implement base-rate and regression analyses to improve judgements of probability. 14. Create multidisciplinary expert centres to enhance specific actor and country knowledge.
Groupthink	Policymakers did not openly consider scenarios and options that were seen to be at odds with existing dominant narratives within organisations.	15. Create non-hierarchical multidisciplinary workgroups to foster critical thinking. 16. Adopt a horizontal decision-making environment to encourage dissenting voices. 17. Adopt internal mitigation mechanisms to balance against image-protection and top-down pressures.
Self-deterrence	Policymakers refrained from taking stronger action out of fear for further escalation by the adversary.	18. Address the risk-propensity of policy and decision-makers to foster calculated risk-taking. 19. Outline escalation risks and risks of inaction to challenge worst-case scenarios. 20. Establish 'shared-expectations' to ensure all policy alternatives aligned with the common goal are considered.

678 Levy, 'Prospect Theory and International Relations', 295; Sweijs and Zilincik, *Cross Domain Deterrence and Hybrid Conflict*, 16,22-23.

679 Levy, 'Prospect Theory and International Relations', 295.

Even though biases cannot, and should not, be overcome, it is essential to take the steps to mitigate their effects in pursuit of effective and conducive decision-making. It must also be acknowledged that biases cannot be understood nor mitigated in isolation. They each shape and influence each other, acting in tandem to drive perceptions, worldviews and inevitably evaluations and policy assessments.

The aforementioned 20 mitigatory measures were created in response to different actors' threat perceptions and assessments prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These measures constitute a reflexive synthesis of steps that, with the advantage of hindsight, could have been taken to improve the decision-making process and outcome. They provide a foundation for both institutional and individual growth.

On top of the need to prevent inconsistencies, wrongful assessments and the need to understand what underlying assumptions shape one's own decision-making, it is equally as important to understand and contextualise the biases and worldview of both adversaries and allies. Knowing what biases influence their decision-making is a useful tool for understanding their actions and shaping one's own response accordingly: 'know thy enemy, know thyself'.

11.2. Mitigatory Measures: General Recommendations

Overall, we offer the following three recommendations:

1. Recognise and acknowledge biases through training

Greater awareness of the existence of biases, and their effects, facilitates efforts to overcome them. The effects of biases must be recognised through bias awareness and bias reduction trainings and simulations and exercises. Groups around policymakers can also be trained to respond and mitigate biases by, for example, adjusting intelligence products to also highlight atypical and critical perspectives and policy alternatives.

2. Develop operational frameworks to understand the adversary

Adversary operational frameworks need to be developed to gain a better understanding of the adversary's perspective and *modus operandi* from their own side, including through the input of more diverse, multidisciplinary teams and through cross-national dialogue with allies.

3. Foster critical thinking and consider conflicting information

Information cycles surrounding key decision-makers should include atypical information and conflicting worldviews. Structured and routinised challenges to dominant institutional narratives can complement efforts to stimulate critical thought, for example through red teaming, devil's advocate groups and reducing top-down hierarchical pressures.

Preventing future crises such as the onset of war in Ukraine may be impossible. But recognising and learning from past mistakes is not. When the next crisis inevitably emerges – and in today's world, they present themselves in quick succession – it is important to recognise and mitigate the biases that influence the perceptions and shape the decisions that are intended to keep us safe.

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Annex 1. Coding Schemes Western Threat Perception

The analysis of Western threat perception in the buildup to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is supported by an analysis of NATO member states' perceived likelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, perceived (existential) threat of Russia to their own country and type of support provided or promised to Ukraine before the invasion. The coding schemes used in this analysis are presented below.

Table 5. Coding scheme support for Ukraine

Type of support	Description
No support	The country does not promise or provide any form of aid to Ukraine. Government statements and analyses portray a potential invasion in Ukraine as already lost.
Diplomatic solutions	The country stresses the importance of diplomatic solutions to de-escalate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.
Economic support	The country promises or provides economic aid to Ukraine. This can take the form of loans or financial support in general, or for military purposes specifically.
Economic sanctions	The country threats or has put in place economic sanctions against Russia in reaction to its military built-up along the border of Ukraine.
Defensive military aid	The country promises or provides defensive military aid to Ukraine. Based on a definition by the OSCE, defensive military aid is defined as small arms and light weapons (SALW) and includes the following: "revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; sub-machine guns; assault rifles; and light machine guns. Light weapons are broadly categorized as those weapons intended for use by several members of armed or security forces serving as a crew. They include heavy machine guns; hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers; portable anti-aircraft guns; portable anti-tank guns; recoilless rifles; portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems; portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems; and mortars of calibres less than 100 mm."[680]
Offensive military aid	The country promises or provides offensive military aid to Ukraine. Based on a definition by SIPRI, offensive military aid is defined as heavy weaponry and includes the following: aircraft; air defence systems; anti-submarine warfare weapons; armoured vehicles; artillery (naval, fixed and mobile); mortars of calibres equal to or above 100mm; engines; missiles; sensors; and satellites.[681]

680 'Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)', OSCE, accessed 21 November 2024, https://salw.osce.org/Topics/ViewPage/2-small-arms-and-light-weapons-salw.

681 SIPRI, 'SIPRI Arms Transfers Database - Sources and Methods'.

Table 6. Coding scheme perceived likelihood of invasion

Perceived likelihood	Description
Unlikely	Government, military and/or intelligence analyses deem the likelihood of a Russian military invasion of Ukraine low to non-existent.
Likely – small-scale	Government, military and/or intelligence analyses deem it likely that Russia will invade limited regions of Ukraine.
Likely – full-scale	Government, military and/or intelligence analyses deem it likely that Russia will launch a full-scale invasion into Ukraine.

Table 7. Coding scheme perceived threat of Russia

Perceived threat	Description
No threat	Government sources do not portray Russia as a threat to the country.
Non-existential threat	Government sources portray Russia as a threat to the economic interests and democratic ideals of the country and/or Europe.
Existential threat	Government sources portray Russia as an existential threat to the country. An existential threat is defined as endangering the survival of the state.

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