



The Hague Centre  
for Strategic Studies

# **Anticipating Regret**

## The Psychology of Deterrence, in Ukraine and Beyond

**Kenneth Payne**

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# Anticipating Regret

## The psychology of deterrence, in Ukraine and beyond

Why did western Allies fail to deter Russia's invasion of Ukraine? How can they improve their performance at deterrence? Here, I suggest that strategists and theorists should pay more attention to regret.

Simply put, they didn't value Ukraine as highly as they do now, with hindsight. That's an aspect of a more general problem: humans do an imperfect job of imagining what our future-selves will want. Thus Western attempts to deter Russia before the invasion were doubtless sincere and captured Western leaders' preferences and risk appetites as they were at the time; but not as they became subsequently. Cue regret.

Here, I reflect on the psychological processes underpinning regret and employ these to explore the Russia-Ukraine episode. I argue that a stable 'autobiographical self' is a powerful illusion, which conceals from us the extent to which past and future versions of ourselves seek different goals and weigh our options differently. Policymakers in this episode recall being absolutely determined to deter Putin, but their actions tell a different story.

These reflections might yield useful ideas about deterrence for practitioners to consider ahead of the next crisis. What can be done? Ultimately, I suggest that policymakers should explicitly reflect on the challenges of 'knowing ourselves' and reconceive deterrence as a dynamic act, which entails imagination as much as reasoning and calculation. Strategic theorists exploring deterrence focus largely on the challenge of understanding adversary minds – a kind of 'lateral' approach to deterrence. In fact, good appreciations of President Putin's mind *were* available – including some by insiders that anticipated what eventually transpired. Instead, strategists would do better to reflect on the difficulties of gauging their own minds – a 'longitudinal' approach to deterrence that weighs goals through time. This is an under-explored aspect of strategy. Not having *wanted* sufficiently to deter Russia, and take the risks to do so, is very different from a failure to have *actually* deterred. The more so if we can't now recall, or feel, that we once felt differently.

There is, I conclude, no complete solution – the presentist, autobiographical self is a hardwired feature of being human. Even being aware of such biases isn't sufficient to overcome them. Yet small, practical remedies may help shift perspectives and challenge received wisdom – such as asking, 'will I always feel this way?' or explicitly revisiting baseline judgments: 'what did we want, and does that still hold?' In forcing themselves to confront uncomfortable, even jarringly discrepant information about their evolving preferences and attitudes, strategists might be roused to greater imagination and creativity in their approaches to deterrence and other strategic goals.

Simply put, western allies didn't value Ukraine as highly as they do now.

## Regret, mentalising and mind-reading

The road not taken has a poignancy in both personal and political relationships. There's something distinctively human about regret. But we are not alone: experimentally, we can construct scenarios in which mammals, informed by negative experience, make different choices when returned to the same situation. And, it transpires, similar brain networks are involved as when humans rue what they might have done differently.<sup>1</sup> Are the animals, though, really motivated by regret? Did they reconstruct and manipulate the past to aid the imagination of what their imagined future selves might want? Did they think, 'I *really* wish I had made that lousy decision differently – ah, look, here's my chance'. Or did they simply think, 'that worked out badly, let's try this instead'?

The difference is subtle, but important. It's between counterfactual reasoning, simulating an alternative path with better payoffs, before taking it; and the alternative, which humans do, and which psychologists refer to as 'mentalising'. This entails reflecting on the content of one's own mind, in a metacognitive fashion: human regret is rumination, by a self, of itself. It requires projecting oneself imaginatively into one's earlier mind, whence to reflect on the best choice to make, in the service of one's own future mind. Mammals can certainly reason counterfactually – *that didn't work; try this*. But this richer version of regret looks like an ability we share only with primates and perhaps a few other species, though the evidence is sparse. It's an exercise in recursive mental simulation – the basic ability to simulate alternative options; and then in primates an ability to simulate a mind that enacts those simulations, to see how it feels about them. The result is mental time travel, by a reflective 'self', exploring the past to imagine the future. This self-reading employs similar cognitive architecture as theorising about other people's minds – perhaps not coincidentally, the two skills seem to emerge developmentally at about the same stage.<sup>2</sup>

Regret features in game theory, that staple of strategic studies. But it's regret of the basic sort, not the rich, mind-reading variety. In the strategy of 'counterfactual regret minimisation' (CRM), agents improve their decision-making by reducing the gap between their actual decision and the best possible move, as revealed in hindsight via counterfactual iterations. Machines using CRM have achieved expert level poker performance – no mean feat given the asymmetric information and role of chance in the game.<sup>3</sup> Alas, though, real life regret minimisation is not as easy for humans as for poker-playing computers. For one, there's rarely the chance to work through many thousands of possible paths and generate robust counterfactuals. Historical cases are unique unto themselves in many ways and comparing them via crude analogical reasoning tends to produce flawed decision-making, including in foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Historical counterfactuals can be illuminating, even fun, but are in no way like replaying the same poker hand.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Coricelli et al., 'Regret and Its Avoidance: A Neuroimaging Study of Choice Behavior', *Nature Neuroscience* 8, no. 9 (September 2005): 1255–62, <https://doi.org/10.1038/nn1514>.

<sup>2</sup> Arnaud D'Argembeau et al., 'Distinct Regions of the Medial Prefrontal Cortex Are Associated with Self-Referential Processing and Perspective Taking', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 19, no. 6 (June 2007): 935–44, <https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2007.19.6.935>.

<sup>3</sup> Noam Brown and Tuomas Sandholm, 'Superhuman AI for Multiplayer Poker', *Science* 365, no. 6456 (30 August 2019): 885–90, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aay2400>.

<sup>4</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, 'What's So Different about a Counterfactual?', *World Politics* 52, no. 4 (July 2000): 550–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020104>.

Policymakers should reconceive deterrence as a dynamic act which entails imagination as much as reasoning and calculation.

And there's the larger difference – CRM in the game theoretic, poker-playing sense doesn't capture those layers of what philosophers sometimes call 'intentionality' – that is, of mind-reading. There is no sense of present-mind simulating a past-mind to see how it feels about various simulated future-minds. There's no sense either of a dance of simulated adversary minds. The poker machine isn't looking for an opponent's 'tell', like James Bond in *Casino Royale*. Its cognition is much more like a rat's – *that didn't work, this option might work better*. In poker, at least, this approach delivers formidable results. In the infinitely more complex real world, by contrast, the advantages of mind-reading over reinforced learning seem abundantly clear. All told, mentalising is an impressive cognitive feat that has allowed us to socialise, and to plan – working flexibly, and drawing on expertise and support from our group towards far distant goals. And yet, it's imperfect. Sometimes we don't remember the past appropriately, sometimes we don't imagine the future accurately. These systematic imperfections, I suggest, underpin the experience of western states deliberating on Ukraine over recent years. How so?

## The autobiographical self and Ukraine

We make a choice and it doesn't pan out. Regret ensues – sincerely wishing we had chosen differently. It can be a painful, emotional experience. But, critically, the regretful 'we' is not the same 'we' that did the choosing. Instead we are imposing continuity backwards – telling a story about ourselves that downplays change in favour of continuity. Our imagined version of ourselves is flawed in one large way: it's overly influenced by the present. Similarly, when we imagine the future, the present 'us' casts a long shadow. The 'we' back then chose what it wanted, anticipating that our future 'we' would feel similarly. So, we experience a powerful illusion of personal continuity – the 'autobiographical self' – that masks change in our attitudes.

That, I contend, is what happened with Ukraine. Western leaders have consistently failed to understand their own minds, both in projecting forward from 2021 to imagine what they *will* want, and then in looking back from the present to imagine what they had *wanted* back then. *Why did we fail to deter when we really wanted to? We must've misunderstood Putin, or miscommunicated our resolve*. Truly, we see ourselves through a glass, darkly.

This is a different way of thinking about deterrence than that offered in most deterrence theory. Strategists well understand that deterrence entails mind-reading: we need a good model of the *other* agents we interact with. Mainstream deterrence theory has spent a good deal of effort reflecting on this aspect of mind-reading challenge, almost to the total exclusion of the other part – self-knowledge. 'Know yourself and know your enemy,' counselled Sun Tzu. But strategists and theorists alike focus largely on his latter challenge.

And, in fact, western strategists in this episode had a decent understanding of their adversary. Expert appraisals of Putin, like that of the Anglo-American Russian specialist Fiona Hill, were rather good. After all, Putin been around a long time, and had plenty of form – in staging military interventions from Georgia, through Syria, sub-Saharan Africa, and even Ukraine itself. Writing with Clifford Gaddy seven years before the 2022 invasion, Hill, argued that gauging Putin was hard – he was a 'master at manipulating information, supressing information and

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creating pseudo-information'.<sup>6</sup> And yet, her own astute portrait provided actionable insights ahead of the invasion. Putin, she noted, was utterly convinced that Russia was embroiled in a 21<sup>st</sup> century war, waged against Russia by the USA and the west; he annexed Crimea in 2014 as part of a strategy of deterrence against that same enemy. His logic: 'leave us alone. [...] Do not threaten us or encroach on our interests in our neighborhood'. Ukraine's post-2014 drift towards the EU and a western identity directly threatened that Russian sphere of influence. All this was exacerbated by an inability on Putin's part to 'understand the mindset of Americans and Europeans'.<sup>7</sup> In turn, westerners 'fail to appreciate how dangerously little Putin understands about *us* – our motives, our mentalities and also our values'.<sup>8</sup> Both sides, insofar as they attempted empathy and insight, saw each other imperfectly. Warning lights ought to have been flashing for readers on the basis of that analysis – more so since Putin, Hill astutely argued, would 'constantly probe for physical and psychological weakness', and understood that NATO wanted to contain Russia 'on the cheap' whilst doing 'everything [it] could to head off another major military confrontation'.<sup>9</sup> Putin would 'keep Ukraine boiling, and he will probe and poke'. His next step would, she argued, depend on 'how his adversary reacts'.<sup>10</sup> A masterful analysis, especially the observation about containing Russia on the cheap; and a convincing conclusion – but not sufficient to produce a rethink about deterrence before it failed in 2022. Why?

I think because the minds that western leaders failed to read was their own, not Putin's. In essence, NATO failed to deter Putin because its members didn't seriously attempt it. Or rather, they didn't attempt it seriously enough, relative to the values of their future selves. They dramatically under-appreciated how much Ukraine would come to matter to them.

The problem was not so much a matter of language as of action, or the lack of it. In April 2021, as Russia accelerated its troop buildup near Ukraine, the US Director of National Intelligence revealed that President Biden had spoken with Putin to, 'register very clearly the seriousness of our concern'.<sup>11</sup> And, as if to indicate instead the lack of seriousness, the US increased its troop strength in Germany by only 500.<sup>12</sup> The following month, the US Secretary of State visited Kyiv, but media coverage focused on America's call for Ukraine to tackle corruption. Scarcely a ringing endorsement of its place inside the citadel of the west. In a December 2021 call to Putin, as Russian troops massed near Ukraine's border, Biden again signalled, 'the United States' unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity'.<sup>13</sup> And still did nothing concrete to deter it. Some tactical weapons were transferred – notably British Javelin and NLAWs anti-tank missiles that later proved useful, but scarcely a bold signal to Putin – *this will cost you far too much*. A little less conversation, a little more action, as 2022's version of President Biden might have advised his younger self. 2021-Biden likely wouldn't have paid attention. No tripwire forces were forthcoming, nor bulk supply of advanced weapon systems, especially for air defence. All that came later.

<sup>6</sup> Fiona Hill, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, New and expanded edition. (Washington, District of Columbia: Brookings Institution Press, 2015). p. 7

<sup>7</sup> Hill. p. 381

<sup>8</sup> Hill. p. 385

<sup>9</sup> Hill, p. 388

<sup>10</sup> Hill, p. 396

<sup>11</sup> Barnes, Julian E. 2021. "Intelligence Chiefs Warn of Russian Troops Near Ukraine and Other Threats." *New York Times*, Apr 14. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/intelligence-chiefs-warn-russian-troops-near/docview/2512560608/se-2>.

<sup>12</sup> Erlanger, Steven, Melissa Eddy, and Helene Cooper. 2021. "More Troops to Germany as U.S. Bolsters Ukraine: [Foreign Desk]." *New York Times*, Apr 14. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/more-troops-germany-as-u-s-bolsters-ukraine/docview/2512209540/se-2>.

<sup>13</sup> "To Handle Putin, US Needs Help of its Allies." 2021. *The Age*, Dec 08, 22. <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/handle-putin-us-needs-help-allies/docview/2607257777/se-2>.

Westerners 'fail to appreciate how dangerously little Putin understands about us – our motives, our mentalities and also our values.'

This is a serious, and under-studied problem in deterrence theory. It's about more than predicting the future; rather, it's about why we struggle to understand the implications of possible futures for ourselves. We fail to read our future minds, just as much if not more than we fail to read other peoples' minds. Why did you eat that cake when you're not particularly hungry and could do with losing a few pounds? Why did President Biden not anticipate his regret of late 2022 and do something about it? The reasons are similar.

## Explaining the flaws in mind-reading

Mind-reading intelligence is our species' USP; the main cognitive ability we have by comparison with other animals. Having started down this road, we've become locked into a social intelligence arms race with other humans, which has spurred on its evolution in us.<sup>14</sup> But nothing's perfect. We see other minds imperfectly, and that, critically, includes other versions of our own mind.

There are, in fact, advantages to seeing *other* minds imperfectly. For one, empathy is local and contingent – we sensibly care more about our ingroup, and our place within it, than we do about far-distant strangers.<sup>15</sup> It's far easier to feel shared emotion, and extend that into sympathy, with those we know intimately and care about. Doing so builds shared identity, and group cohesion, while making it easy to treat strangers with suspicion and aggression, if necessary. So, it's harder to build a faithful picture of another mind when it's alien, or even hostile.

As for seeing our *own* mind imperfectly, and especially skewing towards the present version of it, rather than the past, there are evolutionary upsides to that too. One, particularly valuable, is preservation of self-esteem. The construction of the past in a way that suits us now may not faithfully recapture the past, but that's not the point. The point is to construct a satisfying story about our role that is consistent with how we feel now.<sup>16</sup> Satisfying, that is both for ourselves, and our group. So, the strategist storyteller might say,

*It's not that we didn't value Ukraine enough to defend it – of course we did!  
Ukraine is a vital component in the western ideological camp! No, it's that Putin  
simply could not be deterred, as could a more rational actor.*

In this satisfying story, we are asking the wrong question – *why did deterrence fail?* The alternative question is psychologically uncomfortable – *why didn't we care enough to deter?* That doesn't sound like us. It's hard to imagine not caring enough about something that's now obvious and ingrained in our identity – that we stand with Ukraine, our firm ally, in whom we've subsequently invested a good deal of political, military and financial capital.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Payne, *Strategy, Evolution, and War: From Apes to Artificial Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). Paul Bloom, 'Empathy and Its Discontents', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 21, no. 1 (1 January 2017): 24–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2016.11.004>.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA ; London: Belknap Press, 2002).

The alternative question is psychologically uncomfortable - why didn't we care enough to deter?

This was US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in 2023, telling the satisfying story about deterrence:

[W]e made every effort to get Moscow to de-escalate its manufactured crisis and resolve its issues through diplomacy. [...] Yet it became clear that no amount of diplomatic effort was going to change President Putin's mind. He would choose war.<sup>17</sup>

No amount. We tried everything – he was undeterrable. How do you deter that? And yet the actions fell short of the rhetoric. Limited arms supplies and no tripwire deployments told its own story – of soft diplomatic talk without a big stick.

Comments from CIA Director William Burns echo the line that everything was tried:

[T]he president asked me to go to Moscow and lay out our serious concerns about that, in an unusual amount of detail, to President Putin and some of his closest advisors and then to lay out the serious consequences that would unfold if he chose to execute that plan. I must admit I came away from those conversations even more troubled than when I arrived.<sup>18</sup>

After that October 2021 meeting, Burns concluded that Putin was 'leaning hard' towards war. Communicating resolve and serious consequences had no effect on that attitude. Putin evidently didn't believe the Americans words, perhaps because he could see their deeds, or lack of them.

So the stories of later years might not faithfully capture policy preferences in 2021, but they certainly preserve the self-esteem of the storytellers: we made a sincere effort to deter Putin, and he simply wasn't deterrable.

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## Anticipating regret – or not

What of the 'us' back then, the one that didn't value Ukraine as much as it did subsequently. Why does present 'us' cast such a shadow over possible future versions of ourselves? Why didn't past 'us' anticipate regret? How foolish we are, not to have imagined years of conflict, hundreds of thousands of dead, billions spent and the very architecture of western security under tremendous, existential threat. Surely it makes more sense to have a clear-eyed view of what we might want in future, when it comes to goal setting? There's a sound evolutionary logic to that sort of foresight.<sup>19</sup> So why then the failure of imagination? I see at least five factors worth consideration.

<sup>17</sup> U. S. Mission Russia, 'Speech by Secretary Blinken: "Russia's Strategic Failure and Ukraine's Secure Future."', U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia, 2 June 2023, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinken-russias-strategic-failure-and-ukraines-secure-future/>.

<sup>18</sup> William Burns, 'Remarks at the Aspen Security Forum,' 20 July 2022, [cia.gov](https://www.cia.gov/newsroom/recordings/2022/07/20/20220720-aspen-security-forum-remarks)

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Suddendorf and Michael C. Corballis, 'The Evolution of Foresight: What Is Mental Time Travel, and Is It Unique to Humans?', *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30, no. 3 (June 2007): 299–313; discussion 313–351, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X07001975>.

First is the tendency in humans to value near-term payouts over future ones – payoffs are discounted the further off they arise.<sup>20</sup> There's a sound evolutionary logic here too, of the sort captured in idiom: 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'. In resource-scarce environments where the future remains uncertain and precarious, we'd have been better off times to absorb ourselves in the immediate future. So, the logic: not goading Putin in the immediate future with a rash escalation matters much more than the hazy prospect somewhere down the line of having to deal with the fallout of failed deterrence.

Next is the social rationale for a stable self. My contention is that the 'self' we consciously construct and experience feels stable, even if it is, in fact, more fluid.<sup>21</sup> This stability makes it hard to imagine that future-us will disagree fundamentally with current-us. The goals we have now are surely those we will still have then. What accounts for this stability illusion? Some psychologists see the rationale for the self as social – there to better present ourselves to others, and to understand them through via their own stable-seeming selves.<sup>22</sup> There's an element of triangulation involved – we see ourselves refracted through what others are thinking about us. Stable beliefs and attitudes permit stable interactions, facilitate trust and understanding. And, not coincidentally, they allow the subtle convergence of attitudes within a group in a way that we find hard to detect. So, we may change our minds, even rapidly and markedly, but we preserve the illusion that we have not and will not, which not only distorts our recall of the past, but foreshortens the future.

A third factor suggests a mechanism through which that stable self can be achieved: our inclination to reduce cognitive dissonance. The theory's core idea is that we seek consistency in our attitudes and are motivated to reduce the jarring sensation of internal disagreement.<sup>23</sup> This well studied psychological phenomenon is agnostic about the rationale for reducing dissonance – but one plausible motivation is that desire for a stable self-story. Here the attitudes that are jarring are any that push against our current, stable and cohesive self-concept. Such dissonant ideas interfere with the presentation of a stable self to others, in the here and now. They also interfere with planning, the motivation for which requires some idea that the self that gains from a good plan is the same as the one that makes sacrifices now to implement it.

The theory is also agnostic about *how* consistency is achieved, but among the plausible mechanisms are that we ignore, or downplay discrepant information, as described by confirmation bias. In this episode, that would involve strategists cherry picking information to fit their worldview – perhaps that Putin was dangerous, but essentially cautious; or that deterrence was primarily a matter of communicating more clearly. Or anyway, that current dispositions and capabilities were sufficient for the day. Another plausible mechanism to achieve cognitive consistency and stave off dissonance: that we shift our attitudes to fit new information, but are unaware of the shift. So, by the time we arrive at the future, post invasion, and find ourselves valuing the survival of Ukraine intensely, we find it hard to conceive that past us would have evaluated the problem any differently. When the future arrives and looks rather differently from how we imagined, we apply some 'hindsight bias' to preserve the illusion of a stable self – we always thought it would turn out like this, and we always felt like this about it.

<sup>20</sup> Shane Frederick, George Loewenstein, and Ted O'Donoghue, 'Time Discounting and Time Preference: A Critical Review', *Journal of Economic Literature* 40, no. 2 (2002): 351–401.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Bluck and Tilmann Habermas, 'The Life Story Schema', *Motivation and Emotion* 24, no. 2 (1 June 2000): 121–47, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005615331901>.

<sup>22</sup> Michael S. A. Graziano, *Consciousness and the Social Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Matthew D. Lieberman, *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, Ill: Row, Peterson, 1957).

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A fourth psychological facet is the role of emotion. The stable-self is emotionally experienced, and that present emotional hue, or valence bleeds over into the future. Rather than reason about the future, we *feel* it. After all, much of our reasoning is inherently emotional, including our judgment of risk.<sup>24</sup> So psychologists talk about 'emotional contagion' and mood congruence, where current mood is projected into the model we have of our future selves.<sup>25</sup> If we feel a certain way about Ukraine now, it's rather hard to weight that differently when imagining our future selves. Game theory, with its bias towards rational decisions aimed at minimising regret, fails to capture the ways our shifting, emotionally rich attitudes shape payoffs dynamically.<sup>26</sup>

A fifth and final mechanism that draws us towards the present, rather than future, self-concept: The well-known cognitive distortion that we tend focus on tangible evidence rather than intangibles. Few things are more tangible than the present. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it best with this musing on 'unknown unknowns', but Daniel Kahneman also captured it almost as well with his pithy phrase 'what you see is all there is' – sometimes known as the 'availability heuristic', or 'mere exposure' effect – where information is given more credence if we've got it readily to mind.<sup>27</sup> The present just seems so richly hued, the future fading to progressively uncertain shades of foggy grey the further out we project. The data that constitutes our model of the future is immediately and readily available, selectively brought to mind from the past, partly in accordance with present emotional and social dictates, and then projected, uncertainly into the future. So, Ukraine – with its high corruption, limited military capacity, and former comedian as President – presents rather a different proposition from Ukraine two years into its all-out war with Russia, with a skilled military, and heroic, popular leader. This Ukraine is surely worth defending – but then, what you see is all there is.

These five, interconnected, psychological concepts all point the same way – that it's challenging to truly know yourself, and get inside the mind of a future version of you. The past and future are telescoped into the present, and this present-day self is the one that sets about deterring, or not. Among the consequences are some we can see in this episode. They might, in particular, help explain a persistent gradualism in strategy – where foreign policy decisions are heavily biased to the preservation of *status quo*, and typically draw on trend analysis. The temptation is for incremental, conservative change. This contrasts sharply with the idea in deterrence theory of attaining 'escalation dominance' via a dramatic and sometimes shock-inducing alteration in the terms of engagement.

When Fiona Hill wrote that Putin had a limited understanding of us, perhaps more even than our misappreciation of him, she was right twice over. But the inquest into our failed deterrence has focussed too much on that 'sense of an enemy' – to borrow Zachary Shore's title.<sup>28</sup> Better intelligence might conceivably have helped matters, but I'm sceptical. There were enough astute appraisals of Putin about, like Hill's, to ground perceptions of Putin's worldview. And later, as the invasion loomed, there were no shortages of decent intelligence warnings. Some, like the German intelligence chief stranded in Kyiv on Z-day itself, were evidently overly

<sup>24</sup> Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Gordon H. Bower, 'Mood and Memory', *American Psychologist* 36, no. 2 (1981): 129–48, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.36.2.129>.

<sup>26</sup> Robert B. Zajonc, 'Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 9, no. 2p2 (1968): 1.

<sup>27</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011); Zajonc, 'Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure.'

<sup>28</sup> Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

wedded to their existing understandings, but many insiders were under no illusions about what was coming.

Nor did deterrence fail because it wasn't communicated effectively. Putin may not have understood the west well, as Hill suggests. Clearly, though, he understood it well enough to know that he could invade Ukraine in search of a rapid and decisive victory without facing overwhelming retaliation. Ukraine was outside NATO and the EU, both key indicators of where it lay in western priorities, and in February 2022 it had no real prospect of attaining membership of either. All that discussion came later, once the west changed its appraisal of how much Ukraine mattered.

No, deterrence only 'failed' by the post-February 2022 terms of trade; and those weren't the terms on offer beforehand. The failure, if there was one, was a failure of empathy and imagination, not deterrence. Can that shortcoming be attenuated? How can we realistically overcome those psychological tendencies that allow the present to cast a large shadow over the future? Even an awareness of biases is often insufficient to overcome them: A team of strategists versed in political psychology sounds enticing, at least to this political psychologist. Alas, they'd still be susceptible to the bias blind spot, or introspection illusion, in which we feel ourselves somehow more objective and rational than are others, perhaps because we have access to our internal deliberations, imbuing them with a spurious degree of objectivity.<sup>29</sup> Wargaming or simulation, meanwhile, rehearses the various options, but doesn't engage our feelings. We may 'lose' Ukraine in a wargame without *feeling* the loss as meaningfully as in reality.

Absent time travel, there's no full solution here. But recognising the problem exists still has merit for practitioners. It helps us understand that deterrence is a living thing, felt and imagined, as much as reasoned and calibrated. There's surely wisdom in knowing that the value we place on things changes, no matter that we find it hard, sometimes, to detect any change. Ultimately, fighting to preserve what we value *right now* is only the start of deterrence, not its end point.

Deterrence is a living thing, felt and imagined, as much as reasoned and calibrated.

<sup>29</sup> Emily Pronin and Matthew B. Kugler, 'Valuing Thoughts, Ignoring Behavior: The Introspection Illusion as a Source of the Bias Blind Spot', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 4 (1 July 2007): 565–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.05.011>.



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