The Hague Centre
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Blinded by Bias

Chapter 10 | The Effect of Psychological Biases

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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.[1] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman were among the first to unveil how cognitive shortcuts can lead to biased judgements of probability.[2] Their contributions departed from dominant rational actor models that described human behaviour, introducing psychological and cognitive limits to human rationality.[3] Robert Jervis later applied these concepts to the realm of international politics.[4] He showed how political leaders' perceptions are influenced by psychological and cognitive biases, especially when decision-making occurs under pressure.[5] 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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8] Additionally, through what is described as motivated biases, political and state interests can subconsciously alter decision-makers' perceptions of threat.[9] For instance, mistrust in US intelligence since the Iraq 2003 invasion shaped leaders' perceptions of intelligence reports

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

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

3 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.

4 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.

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

6 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.

7 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.

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

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

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.[10] 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.*"[11]

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.[12] 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.

10 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.

11 Interview 27

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

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.[13] 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.

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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."[14] 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.[15]

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.[16] The result is a neglect of probability; individuals under- or overestimate the likelihood of certain events based on the memories available to them.[17] These claims are supported by statistical and experimental studies that found evidence for the availability heuristic in the broader population.[18] 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.[19]

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13 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.

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

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

16 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.

17 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.

18 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.

19 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.[20] 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.[21] 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."[22]

The Availability Heuristic and the War in Ukraine

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

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."*[23] 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.*"[24]

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.*"[25]

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20 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.

21 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.

22 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 218.

23 Interview 7

24 Interview 41

25 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.*"[26]

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.*"[27]

"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.*"[28]

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.*"[29]

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.*"[30]

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

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26 Interview 27
27 Interview 9
28 Interview 29
29 Interview 3
30 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.*"[31]

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."*[32] 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."*[33] 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."*[34] 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.[35] 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.*"[36]

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.

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.[37] 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

31 Interview 43

32 Interview 10

33 Interview 27

34 Interview 2

35 Interview 14

36 Interview 2

37 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."[38] 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.[39] Especially when dealing with uncertainty, high stakes and time pressure, cognitive dissonance is one of many cognitive biases that can influence decision-making.[40] 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.[41]

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.[42] 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.[43] 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.[44] 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.[45]

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 invasion, believing that diplomacy would prevail, while some UK advisors at the highest echelons

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

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

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

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

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

43 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.

44 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.

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

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."*[46] 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."*[47] 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."*[48]

"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.*"[49]

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."*[50]

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.*"[51]

46 Interview 11
47 Interview 2
48 Interview 11
49 Interview 7
50 Interview 13
51 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.*"[52]

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.[53]

"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.*"[54]

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.

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.[55] 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.[56] In the absence of a deeper understanding

52 Interview 16

53 Interview 14

54 Interview 2

55 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/.

56 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.[57] 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.[58]

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.[59] Experimental research has replicated this process, proving that projected images influence the interpretation of an adversary's intentions and actions.[60] 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.[61] 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.[62]

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.

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

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

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

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

61 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.

62 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?*"[63]

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.*"[64]

"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*."[65] 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.*"[66]

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?*'"[67] 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.*"[68]

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:

63 Interview 16
64 Interview 29
65 Interview 27
66 Interview 10
67 Interview 2
68 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.*"[69]

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.*"[70]

"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*."[71] 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*." [72]

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.*"[73]

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.[74]

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.[75] 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.[76] 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:

69 Interview 25
70 Interview 9
71 Interview 25
72 Interview 25
73 Interview 23
74 Interview 14
75 Interview 1
76 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."*[77]

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."

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.[78] 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. [79] 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."[80] 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.

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77 Interview 29

78 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/.

79 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.

80 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.[81] Importantly, the heuristic only operates when the question at hand is salient to the political leader's electoral support base.[82] 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.[83] 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.[84] 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.[85] 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.[86]

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:

81 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.

82 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.

83 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.

84 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.

85 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.

86 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.*"[87]

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.*"[88]

"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.*"[89]

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.*"[90]

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.*"[91]

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."*[92] 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.[93] Domestic costs and public opinion were therefore central in Dutch policies and further influenced Dutch threat assessment and policy response.

87 Interview 15
88 Interview 27
89 Interview 23
90 Interview 43
91 Interview 7
92 Interview 26
93 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. [94] 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.'*"[95]

"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.*"[96]

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."*[97]

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.

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.[98] 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

94 Interview 1

95 Interview 3

96 Interview 9

97 Interview 23

98 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.[99] 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.[100] 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.[101] 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.[102] 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.[103]

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.[104] 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.[105] 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.[106] 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.[107]

99 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.

100 Tversky and Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', 1124.

101 Robert Jervis, 'Representativeness in Foreign Policy Judgments', *Political Psychology* 7, no. 3 (1986): 487–88, https://doi.org/10.2307/3791253.

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

103 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.

104 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.

105 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.

106 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.

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

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. [108] 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."*[109]

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."*[110]

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."*[111]

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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[108] Heuser, *Flawed Strategy*.

[109] Interview 23

[110] Interview 23

[111] 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.*"[112]

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.*"[113]

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.*"[114]

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. [115] Similarly, the US based their assessments on Russia's previous force projections. As one former senior US government official recalled:

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[112] Interview 29
[113] Interview 9
[114] Interview 3
[115] 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*."[116]

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."*[117] 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*."[118] 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."*[119] 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.[120] Paraphrasing another senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, "*Even Zelensky doubted that Ukraine could resist.*"[121] 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*."[122]

"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.*"[123]

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.

116 Interview 25
117 Interview 2
118 Interview 7
119 Interview 26
120 Interview 30
121 Interview 1
122 Interview 28
123 Interview 11

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.[124] 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."[125] 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.[126] 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.[127] 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.[128]

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.[129] 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.[130] Importantly, groupthink can also occur between interconnected groups responsible for crisis response, including military alliances.[131] Statistical and comparative analyses of crisis decision-making have found proof of Janis' original theory, but mainly stress the importance of impartial leadership styles and organised

124 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.

125 Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 9.

126 Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 197–98.

127 Hogg and Gaffney, 'Group Processes & Intergroup Relations', 9.

128 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.

129 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.

130 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.

131 Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 99–100.

patterns of group conduct to prevent its occurrence.[132] 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.[133] 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.[134]

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."*[135] 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.*"[136]

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.*"[137]

A high-ranking French military official suggested that dominant organisational beliefs about the trustworthiness of American intelligence also influenced French threat perception:

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132 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.

133 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.

134 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.

135 Interview 27

136 Interview 9

137 Interview 29

"*The bias is very strong, probably stronger than we think in the military, against what the Americans can say or can think.*"[138] 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.[139] 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.*"[140]

"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?*"[141]

Similarly, a senior Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs official shared their fruitless attempts to change dominant beliefs about relations with Russia.[142] 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.*"[143] 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.*"[144]

138 Interview 27
139 Interview 19
140 Interview 23
141 Interview 35
142 Interview 6
143 Interview 16
144 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.

Self-deterrence

Despite the contributions of weapons deliveries to Ukrainian deterrence against Russia, Western decision-makers were concerned about provoking a Russian reaction.

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.[145] 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.[146] 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."[147] 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.[148]

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."[149] 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.[150] 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.[151] This risk attitude or propensity is influenced by both individual personality characteristics as well as the situational context in which a decision is made.[152] Prospect theory, for example, proposes that individuals will generally be more risk-averse

145 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.

146 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.

147 '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/.

148 We thank Beatrice Heuser for this observation.

149 Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', 14.

150 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.

151 Quattrone and Tversky, 'Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice', 720–21.

152 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.[153] 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.[154] 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.[155] In addition to framing effects, risk propensity is influenced by factors like age, gender and cultural variables.[156] 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.[157] 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.[158] 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.[159]

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.*"[160] Decision-makers' low risk propensity led

153 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.

154 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.

155 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.

156 Levy, 'Prospect Theory and International Relations', 304–6.

157 Jervis, 'Deterrence and Perception', 14.

158 Michaels, 'Rethinking the Relevance of Self-Deterrence', 115.

159 '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.

160 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.*"[161]

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.*"[162]

"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'.*"[163]

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.[164] 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.*"[165]

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."* [166] 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?"*[167]

161 Interview 3
162 Interview 9
163 Interview 9
164 Interview 30
165 Interview 23
166 Interview 15
167 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.*"[168]

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."*[169]

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.*"[170]

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.

168 Interview 43
169 Interview 43
170 Interview 28

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