The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Blinded by Bias

Chapter 2 | Conditions for Threat Credibility: Russia in Western Eyes

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Conditions for Threat Credibility: Russia in Western Eyes

Russia had been at war with Ukraine since its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and through its continued military presence in eastern Ukraine. From April 2021 onwards, Russia stationed large numbers of military forces along the Russian-Ukrainian border and started to conduct military exercises. This sparked an immediate global crisis as it was the largest presence of troops massed at Ukraine's borders since the 2014 annexation of Crimea.[1] Although Russia ostensibly withdrew its forces, it left much of the military infrastructure as well as a force presence of more than 80,000 troops in place, leaving tensions unresolved. The buildup prompted a great power summit between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in Geneva on 16 June 2021. Both leaders emerged with a "Joint Statement on Strategic Stability" and expressed a commitment to improving relations.[2] However, only weeks later, on 29 June, tensions flared when Russia was accused of aggressive actions against a Dutch frigate in the Black Sea, underscoring the region's volatility.[3]

By the summer, tensions continued to mount, particularly after Putin published his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which in hindsight offered a justification for aggression.[4] The situation worsened in September with Zapad 2021, the largest Russian-Belarusian joint military exercise since 1981, further stoking fears of a looming conflict.[5] On 10 September, the EU as well as the UK prolonged the sanctions they had imposed in 2014 on Russian individuals and businesses with close ties to the Kremlin who were thought to be involved in undermining Ukrainian territorial sovereignty.[6] With tensions once again on the rise, NATO expelled eight Russian officials from its headquarters for espionage on 6 October.[7] Prompting Moscow to retaliate by shutting down its NATO mission and closing NATO's office

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

in Moscow on 18 October. By 13 November, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was sounding the alarm, warning that approximately 100,000 Russian troops had massed along the border.[8] Diplomatic efforts continued, but the signs of impending war became harder to ignore. On 7 December, Biden held a tense call with Putin, convinced that an invasion was imminent. A week later, on 15 December, Russia presented a draft treaty to the US and NATO, demanding concessions that were deemed to be completely unrealistic.[9] As the crisis escalated, US intelligence reported in early January 2022 that Russia was preparing a false flag operation to justify a broader conflict. This was made public on 14 January, reinforcing fears of an imminent attack. After a series of NATO meetings, the US and the alliance formally rejected Russia's demands on 26 January. Days later, on 29 January, US intelligence revealed that Russian forces had even stockpiled blood supplies near the front lines.[10] This indicated, to some observers at least, an ominous sign that an invasion was near. Later in February, tensions reached a boiling point. What had once been a geopolitical standoff erupted into large-scale war, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Even if Russia's invasion may not have been preordained, it is puzzling that this was met with disbelief, because there was plenty of reason to conclude that Russia in effect constituted a clear and present danger. In fact, the Russian threat to Ukraine satisfied all conditions to be considered credible according to three salient explanations of threat credibility in the academic literature succinctly summarised with (1) interests, (2) capabilities, and (3) reputation based on past behaviour.[11] In short, Russia had repeatedly stated its interests, had developed the military capabilities which it had put in place, and had clearly shown its proclivity to use military force, not just in other theatres but also against Ukraine (see Table 1). Credibility, a well-established concept in the academic literature, does not imply inevitability, nor should it be conflated with the concept of probability or likelihood, terms that are employed in intelligence assessments. Even with these indicators flashing red, a range of scenarios, including a limited incursion as well as a full-scale invasion, remained possible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vital Interests

Interests motivate a state to actually follow through on a threat. Thus, the more interests are at stake for a potential aggressor, the more credible its threats will be.[12] Additionally, credibility will be higher if the costs of carrying out the threat are presumed to be lower than the interests at stake. In this regard, communication is key; if interests are not clearly communicated, they may not be perceived as such. These interests can be material in nature, such as access to natural resources and control of strategic areas, or immaterial, for example because of the cultural or religious significance that is attached to a territory.[13]

In the case of Ukraine, President Putin stated both material and immaterial interests in his 2021 summer article and subsequent December demands presented to the US and NATO in the lead-up to the invasion.[14] Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's political and societal elites have repeatedly stressed the geopolitical and historical significance of Ukraine to Russia.[15] Putin, too, has at numerous occasions referred to the unity between the Russian and Ukrainian people ever since he first took office in 2000. Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, this rhetoric started to include references to Russia's imperial history to legitimise Russia's annexation of the peninsula.[16] In July 2021 in his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians

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

13 Press, *Calculating Credibility*, 25.

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

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

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

and Ukrainians", Putin compiled these narratives claiming that "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. [...] Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people."[17] Some observers portrayed the essay in hindsight as an ultimatum to the Ukrainian people, with the survival of the Ukrainian state dependent on their decision to align themselves with Russia.[18] Whether this in effect constituted a final warning or not, it is clear that Putin had clearly and publicly signalled the cultural and historical significance of a 'Russian Ukraine' at least since the annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine was not only relevant to Russia for cultural and historical reasons but also constituted a strategic interest. Russian strategic culture is ingrained with a sense of vulnerability to the West on the one hand and a feeling of entitlement to a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood on the other. As a result, Ukraine's increased cooperation with the West was perceived in Russia as a threat to its national security and its status as a great power. Inside Russia, these perceptions prompted increasingly extreme narratives legitimising the invasion of Ukraine.[19] Externally, Putin expressed these strategic interests in demands presented to the US and NATO in December 2021. The draft treaties included provisions prohibiting NATO membership for former Soviet states including Ukraine, reducing US and NATO troop and missile deployments to the 1997 status, and calling for the removal of American nuclear weapons from the continent.[20] While the US and NATO considered these demands totally unacceptable, they certainly clearly communicated the strategic interests that Russia attached to Ukraine.

Military Capabilities

To determine the credibility of a military threat, decision-makers evaluate a country's military capabilities. A threat is more likely to be credible in the perception of the recipient if the aggressor has the ability to follow through on it.[21] Capabilities include the quality and quantity of (major) weapon systems, the ability of a country to finance a war, and a society's willingness to suffer casualties. Depending on the threat posed, different aspects and branches of military power will be relevant.[22] In the buildup to the invasion of Ukraine, there was clearly the perception that Russia had embarked on a successful process of modernisation of its military forces among NATO allies, complemented with widely shared intelligence on the buildup of troops at the border.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

on mass-mobilisation to a smaller, more professional army.[23] Organisational reforms were understood to have transformed the Russian military into a rapidly deployable and trained force, capable of joint operations between the army and air force.[24] These organisational changes were accompanied by the modernisation of existing weaponry and equipment, and the development of new capabilities.[25] Despite delays, it was projected that by 2020 70% of Russia's ground forces' equipment had been modernised.[26] And while the introduction of next-generation stealth fighters, battle tanks and naval platforms lagged behind stated goals, Russia significantly advanced its rockets, cruise missiles and radars, enabling longer-range precision strikes.[27] Taken together, it was widely perceived in the buildup to the 2022 invasion that the Russian armed forces had transformed into a modern operating force capable of executing swift, regional campaigns.[28] Russia's military involvement in Syria largely reinforced these beliefs, providing Russian troops and military leaders with valuable combat experience and opportunities to test new weapon systems.[29] Thus, while the actual invasion may have exposed the Potemkin state of Russia's military, prior to the invasion the prevailing perceptions in the Western expert and policymaking community were that Russia possessed the military capabilities with which it could defeat Ukraine.[30]

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In addition to possessing the theoretical capability to follow through on a threat, a heightened state of military readiness further contributes to threat credibility. First in April and later from September 2021 onwards, US intelligence sources observed an irregular buildup of Russian armed forces along the border with Ukraine.[31] After the September Zapad 2021 exercise in western Russia, military equipment, communication centres and personnel normally stationed elsewhere remained.[32] By October, an estimated 80.000 to 90.000 Russian soldiers were stationed close to the border with Ukraine, in addition to tens of thousands of troops in Crimea.[33] In January 2022, Ukrainian authorities alleged Russia to have deployed 127.000 soldiers, including 21.000 air and sea troops, and *Iskander* missiles in the vicinity of Ukraine.[34] Additionally, US officials claimed that these troops had been equipped with additional medical supplies and blood bags, indicating combat readiness, and further enhancing the credibility of a possible invasion.[35]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reputation and Behaviour

Despite critiques on the influence of past behaviour on the credibility of threats in international security, recent scholarship suggests that a reputation for resolve does impact credibility, alongside factors such as stated interests and capabilities.[36] For example, states that stood firm during multiple crises are found to face fewer challenges in the future than those that did not.[37] According to this logic, a reputation of military resolve will increase the credibility of any future threats.[38] In the context of the war in Ukraine, it could be argued that Russia's previous military actions in Georgia, Syria, Crimea and the Donbas contributed to a reputation of resolve, thereby increasing the credibility of a potential invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Russia's military aggression in Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas contained many features that were also present in the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion of Georgia, for example, was preceded by an anti-Western turn in Putin's foreign policy, portraying Russia's national security to be under threat. Already at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin distanced himself from the existing European security architecture, calling out "NATO expansion" and troop deployments to the borders of Russia.[39] Following the Bucharest agreement promising Georgia and Ukraine future NATO membership in April 2008, Russia accused the Georgian government of human rights violations and highlighted its interest in protecting Russian citizens in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions.[40] In August that year, Russia invaded Georgia. The annexation of Crimea and Russia's military involvement in the Donbas followed a similar pattern. In 2014, Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution and subsequent 'turn to Europe' threatened Russia's self-stated security interests in the region. Similar to the Georgian case, Russia accused the Ukrainian state of human rights violations and supported claims of independence by Russian-speaking populations in Crimea and the Donbas.[41] The buildup to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine involved a similar pattern, with Russia stating threats to its national security, accusing Ukraine of the genocide of ethnic Russians, and proclaiming the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people.[42] Given Russia's history of demonstrating military resolve in similar situations, even if leading to partial rather than full-scale invasions, the literature suggests that Russia's threats should have gained in credibility.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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