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Blinded by Bias

Chapter 9 | Open-eyed yet Cautious: The United States

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Open-eyed yet Cautious: The United States

The United States' approach to Ukraine and Russia was shaped by a combination of vectors, at times pulling in opposing directions, including a commitment to freedom and the sovereignty of Ukraine, a historical cautiousness in dealing with a nuclear peer competitor, and a sense that the US should lead the alliance and the free world. This caused the US government to tread a fine line. At the same time as it provided military support to Ukraine and rallied the G7 and the EU to impose severe economic sanction packages, it abstained from sending more robust military support including advanced weapons, let alone forces, for fears of provoking Russia. However, over the course of the crisis, the US position hardened. For example, in 2021 alone, the US had allocated \$650 million in military aid to Ukraine in total, including a secretive multi-phase aid stream worth \$200 million greenlit by the Biden Administration in December 2021.¹ That same month the Senate voted on the National Defense Authorization Act which extended the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative—originally established in 2016—increasing its annual budget by \$50 million, from \$250 to \$300 million for 2022.² In the lead-up to the full-scale invasion, US offensive military aid packages consisted of: Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank missiles, small arms, boats, drones, artillery and ammunition.³ By early 2022, it had established itself together with the UK and some Eastern European nations in the Buzzard camp. Having embarked on an extensive intelligence diplomacy campaign, it provided Ukraine with progressively larger military aid packages and spearheaded the preparation of an economic retaliatory response by a coalition of the willing. Although these proactive measures enabled Ukraine to be somewhat better prepared for the coming invasion and allowed the coalition to impose significant economic cost on Russia after the invasion, the US government failed to devise an approach that, in hindsight, sufficed to effectively deter Russia.

Mercurial Relations

The early 21st century history of US-Russian relations was marked by a consistently regressive trend. Starting off amicably when Vladimir Putin offered his full support to the US war on terror in the wake of 9/11, tensions would accumulate in the years thereafter. Here too, Putin's infamous 2007 Munich speech marked an important moment, when he denounced the US and its 'monopolistic dominance' in world affairs, while portraying NATO's eastward expansion as expansionist and escalatory.⁴ In 2008, at the NATO Bucharest Summit, at US insistence, NATO opened its doors to future membership to Georgia and Ukraine without setting any

¹ Beals, 'Ukraine Receives Second Batch of Weapons from US'.

² 'U.S. Congress Includes \$300 Million for Ukraine, Addresses China in Massive Defense Bill | Reuters'.

³ Yousif, 'U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine'.

⁴ 'Reading Russia Right', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed 3 March 2025, <https://carnegie-endowment.org/posts/2007/05/reading-russia-right?lang=en>.

concrete timeline.⁵ At the summit, Vladimir Putin reportedly tried to convince George W. Bush that “Ukraine was not even a real nation-state”—apparently to no avail.⁶

That same year, Russia invaded and captured parts of Georgian territory under the pretext that they were seeking to prevent a genocide.⁷ Barack Obama’s 2009 ‘reset’ with Russia that followed got off to a shaky start.⁸ The gift that then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov was a button with the caption ‘overload’ rather than the intended ‘reset’ message.⁹ For a limited time, the reset delivered tangible results including paving the way for the 2010 New START treaty and fostering closer cooperation between the two countries on sanctions against Iran and Afghanistan supply routes.¹⁰ The relationship deteriorated, however, as a result of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. This made it clear to the US government that Russia’s use of military force against a sovereign neighbour was not a one-off event. The annexation of Crimea was met with surprise followed by condemnation by then Secretary of State John Kerry: “It is really a stunning, wilful choice by President Putin to invade another country. [...] You just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext.”¹¹ The US, joined by the EU, adopted sanctions against Russian companies and individuals, and the US started shipping defensive military equipment and offering officer training programmes to Ukraine.¹² Obama’s characterisation of Russia as a “regional power” aggravated Russian leaders who grappled with the loss of their Cold War superpower status.¹³

In the years that followed, multiple incidents troubled the US-Russia relationship including Russia’s support for Bashar al-Assad’s regime in the Syrian Civil War and Russia’s interference in the 2016 US presidential election.¹⁴ Despite better personal relations between President Donald Trump, who assumed office in 2017, and Putin, sanctions continued.¹⁵ Trump even approved the delivery of additional military equipment, including *Javelin* anti-tank weaponry. Trump meanwhile put pressure on Ukrainian President Zelensky to collect information on

⁵ Zaryckyj Walter, ‘Why the Bucharest Summit Still Matters Ten Years On’, *Atlantic Council*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-the-bucharest-summit-still-matters-ten-years-on/>.

⁶ James Marson / Kiev, ‘Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine’, *TIME*, 25 May 2009, <https://time.com/archive/6946776/putin-to-the-west-hands-off-ukraine/>.

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

⁸ Peter Dickinson, ‘The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin’s Green Light’, *Atlantic Council*, 7 August 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>.

⁹ David S. Cloud, ‘Wrong Red Button’, *POLITICO*, 6 March 2009, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/03/video-wrong-red-button-019719>.

¹⁰ McFaul Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia* (HMH Books, 2018).

¹¹ Rebecca Kaplan, ‘John Kerry Warns of Consequences for Russia after Ukraine Invasion - CBS News’, 2 March 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kerry-warns-of-consequences-for-russia-after-ukraine-invasion/>.

¹² Krishnadev Calamur, ‘U.S. Steps In Response To Russia’s Intervention In Ukraine’, *Politics & Policy, NPR*, 7 March 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/03/07/287278214/u-s-steps-in-response-to-russias-intervention-in-ukraine>; U.S. Embassy Kyiv, ‘FACT SHEET: U.S. Assistance to Ukraine since February 2014’, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 15 June 2016, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-u-s-assistance-ukraine-since-february-2014/>; ‘Ukraine FY 2020 Country Assistance Fact Sheet’, US Department of State, June 2021, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Ukraine_FY-2020-Country-Assistance-Fact-Sheet.pdf.

¹³ Michael D. Shear and Peter Baker, ‘Obama Answers Critics, Dismissing Russia as a “Regional Power”’, *World, The New York Times*, 25 March 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/26/world/europe/hague-summit-focuses-on-preventing-trafficking-of-nuclear-materials.html>.

¹⁴ Damien Gayle, ‘CIA Concludes Russia Interfered to Help Trump Win Election, Say Reports’, *US News, The Guardian*, 10 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/10/cia-concludes-russia-interfered-to-help-trump-win-election-report>.

¹⁵ Uri Friedman, ‘America Hasn’t Always Supported Ukraine Like This’, *Politics, The Atlantic*, 21 November 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/11/how-vital-us-military-aid-ukraine/602407/>.

Joe Biden's family's dealings in Ukraine, ultimately leading to Trump's first impeachment, and soured US-Ukraine relations.¹⁶ Between assuming office and the autumn of 2021, the Biden administration sought to normalise ties with Russia, aiming to establish a more stable and predictable relationship, also with an eye towards reinforcing strategic stability between the two nuclear powers.¹⁷ Relations soured, however, when Biden called Putin a "killer" and imposed sanctions on Russia for interference in US elections and cyber-attacks on US government systems in the spring of 2021.¹⁸ In response, during a phone call addressing these issues, Putin dismissed Biden's accusations, stating: "You're wrong about everything."¹⁹

From Moscow with Coercion?²⁰

In US government circles, Russia's April 2021 military buildup was viewed with concern but not directly interpreted as a sign of an impending invasion. This was after all part of Russia's cross-domain coercive strategy playbook.²¹ Russia conducted these types of military exercises annually with Zapad exercises dating back to the Soviet Union. Military analysts noted that these exercises could be used for coercive signalling, demonstrating Russia's preparedness for war, but also that they could mask Russian preparations for an invasion.²² The large size of the exercise did raise officials' eyebrows but was overall interpreted as a show of strength and a coercive signal. As one senior US official noted, "*The military buildup in April 2021 was a way to test Western resolve.*"²³ Within this context, it was seen as a way to secure a high-level meeting between the two countries' leaders. The Biden administration initiated a summit to normalise relations with Russia, which was scheduled on 16 June in Geneva.²⁴ US Ambassador to Russia John J. Sullivan recalled that during the extended bilateral meeting, in which he participated, the agenda covered arms control, cybersecurity, Russia's militarisation of the Arctic, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. In his memoir, Sullivan notes: "To my memory, Ukraine was not mentioned once in the expanded bilateral, although it was raised briefly in the 1+1 meeting."²⁵ In the press conference immediately after the event, Biden stated

¹⁶ Friedman, 'America Hasn't Always Supported Ukraine Like This'.

¹⁷ The White House, 'Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia', The White House, 13 April 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/13/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia-4-13/>.

¹⁸ 'Biden: Putin Is a "Killer", Russia to "Pay" for Election Meddling', Al Jazeera, accessed 4 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/17/biden-putin-is-a-killer-russia-will-pay-for-election-meddling>.

¹⁹ Woodward, *War*, 24.

²⁰ Inspired by Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, 'From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, nos 1–2 (2018): 33–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1347872>.

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

²² Pili and Minniti, 'Understanding Russia's Great Games'.

²³ Interview 36–40

²⁴ 'Biden to Press Putin on Respecting Human Rights in Geneva', World, *Reuters*, 30 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-press-putin-respecting-human-rights-during-geneva-meeting-2021-05-30/>.

²⁵ John J. Sullivan and General Jim Mattis, *Midnight in Moscow: A Memoir from the Front Lines of Russia's War Against the West* (Little, Brown and Company, 2024), 192–93.

that he would continue the “United States’ unwavering commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.”²⁶

The summit did not however generate any meaningful results on Ukraine because of a lack of commitment on the part of Russia. “*At the summit in Geneva, Russia wasn’t negotiating in good faith and was not changing its overall posture,*” explained a senior US official.²⁷ The official added: “*What it was really after was a reaffirmation of its status as a great power.*”²⁸ Russia was considered to interpret calls for dialogue, especially when it stood firm, as a sign of weakness and willingness to concede.²⁹ The Biden administration’s preference to at least engage in talks with Russia and stabilise the relationship over areas of mutual concern, specifically nuclear weapons, took precedence. Some officials in the US government still considered the summit a modest success because it helped re-establish diplomatic channels, eased tensions in some areas, and demonstrated Biden’s commitment to pragmatic diplomacy.³⁰ One of the few things agreed to at the summit, however, was that US Ambassador to Russia John J. Sullivan was allowed to return to his post after having been advised by the Russian government to leave.

Meanwhile, Russia “*effectively left forces behind in April, which they could later use as a foundation for conducting an invasion*”, as one senior US official recalled, which did raise concern.³¹ The failure of the summit to generate any substantive outcomes on Ukraine, as well as the absence of a clear explanation for the military buildup, marked a turning point in different parts of the US government. Intelligence agencies increasingly viewed Russian actions as more than mere posturing, keeping an ever-closer eye on how the situation at the border developed. Ultimately, however, as one former senior US Department of Defense official noted, Putin effectively “*spooked the West and Biden met with him in the summer and kind of agreed to get things back on track.*”³²

The immediate impact of Putin’s subsequent summer essay on these already existing concerns should not be overstated. As National Security Council Russia director Eric Green stated: “I think it speaks to Putin’s disillusionment with the Ukrainian government” which Putin appeared to be increasingly fed up with.³³ Looking back on the essay, however, one senior US official recounts that in hindsight, “*The summer essay was part of an intel operation to speak directly to the Russian-leaning people in Ukraine, mobilise support, and to flip the Ukrainian elites over to Russia.*”³⁴ At the time, however, this was not perceived as such. In the words of CIA Director Bill Burns, “There was nothing really new in it.”³⁵ Similar to their UK colleagues, US officials were also focused on the hastened withdrawal from Afghanistan and the takeover of the country by Taliban forces.³⁶

²⁶ U. S. Mission Geneva, ‘Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference – Geneva, Switzerland’, U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, 17 June 2021, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2021/06/17/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-geneva-switzerland/>.

²⁷ Interview 36-40

²⁸ Interview 36-40

²⁹ Dumitru Minzarari, ‘Making Sense of the Contested Biden-Putin Summit’, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), 7, accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/making-sense-of-the-contested-biden-putin-summit>.

³⁰ Thomas Graham, ‘After Geneva Summit, Daunting Diplomacy Ahead for U.S. and Russia | Council on Foreign Relations’, Council on Foreign Relations, 17 June 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/after-geneva-summit-daunting-diplomacy-ahead-us-and-russia>.

³¹ Interview 36-40

³² Interview 9

³³ Woodward, *War*, 44.

³⁴ Interview 36-40

³⁵ Woodward, *War*, 45.

³⁶ The White House, ‘Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan’, The White House, 14 April 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

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

Preparing for the Worst

In this context, by late August 2021, concerns over the April buildup, at least in the public eye, seemed to have quieted down. As then US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated: “A variety of things took place that brought everybody’s temperature down.”³⁷ This was in part due to the focus on Afghanistan and as one former senior US Department of Defense official noted, speaking with hindsight:

*“By the end of summer 2021, Putin came to the conclusion that there was a window of time, to achieve his maximalist, revisionist, imperial ambitions in Ukraine, and that window ultimately would close. And it would close because Europe would get its act back together, the US, after coming a little wobbly after Afghanistan, would get things back together.”*³⁸

Moscow may have realised that this was their chance to realise these ambitions, although this view is still contested to this day. As CIA Director Bill Burns later reflected, “I think it reinforced Putin’s conception of how easy it would be.”³⁹ However, overall, the prevailing attitude was one of being watchful but cautious. The situation left many in the US government wary of what was to come. As National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne stated at the time: “There was a sense of ‘This is not over yet’ as we were leaving Geneva.”⁴⁰ And although the message of the summer essay was not new, it was certainly noticed, also by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. “His rhetoric began to change quite markedly in public. At that point, our antenna went up higher. Something was shifting in his mindset.”⁴¹

From September onwards, US intelligence services started seeing clear signs of a renewed buildup. In a classified October meeting with the president’s cabinet, Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence, and CIA Director Bill Burns, presented evidence of a military plan to invade Ukraine with 175,000 troops.⁴² In parallel, the Russian facade of diplomacy began to unravel. A senior US official later remarked with respect to the negotiations over Ukraine, “It was not clear to us that the Russians were serious. From mid-October onwards, it seemed as if Russian diplomats were running on autopilot.”⁴³ Recognising the gravity of the threat, the US government began to prepare for the worst and stepped-up efforts to build an international coalition. Its attempts to convey the credibility of the threat were met, as discussed in this report, with mixed reactions from US allies.⁴⁴ On 30 October, during a private session at a G20 summit, when President Biden shared US concerns about a potential full-scale invasion, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron were sceptical.⁴⁵ The German and French governments were reluctant to rely on the provided US intelligence, even if the credibility of US intelligence was enhanced by its accuracy as the crisis enveloped. As Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland recounted:

³⁷ Banco et al., “Something Was Badly Wrong”.

³⁸ Interview 9

³⁹ Woodward, *War*, 75.

⁴⁰ Banco et al., “Something Was Badly Wrong”.

⁴¹ Banco et al., “Something Was Badly Wrong”.

⁴² Woodward, *War*, 72.

⁴³ Interview 36-40

⁴⁴ Phythian and Strachan-Morris, ‘Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War’.

⁴⁵ Woodward, *War*, 72.

“The fact that we found the [Russian war] plans when we did—and they were as robust as they were—and then they began to get played out on the ground as Putin moved more and more of his arsenal to Ukraine’s borders, gave us the time that we needed to prepare.”⁴⁶

In addition to warning NATO allies, part of the US strategy focused on deterrence by diplomacy, but also on demonstrating to the Russian government that the US was aware of Moscow’s plans. To deliver this direct warning, the US dispatched CIA Director Burns to Moscow to make clear to Putin that *“If you do this, there are going to be enormous costs to Russia... We’re going to ensure that.”*⁴⁷ At the meeting, which ended up taking place over video connection as Putin was in Sochi at the time, Putin flatly denied any intention to invade Ukraine. Meanwhile, there was no attempt to engage by the Russians, the Americans found. As one senior US official recounted after the visit: *“In our November meeting, there were no real demands. It seemed that they were happy to agree to disagree.”*⁴⁸

“If you do this, there are going to be enormous costs to Russia... We’re going to ensure that.”

Intelligence Diplomacy

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

“In September, they came to me with this map, and laid it out on my table; they explained, this was different, sir, this looks different, this is bigger in size and scale and scope, the disposition, composition of the force, etc.”⁴⁹

In response to this round of escalation, officials at the National Security Council were tasked with drafting contingency plans based on several escalation scenarios. These were then presented to Jake Sullivan around mid-November.⁵⁰ By early December, this effort resulted in the establishment of a dedicated team, the ‘Tiger Team’, with the task of thinking “through every possible dimension of the US response and produce a ‘break glass’ playbook to guide it.”⁵¹ The first draft was complete by Christmas and the playbook was later approved in the second week of February by President Biden.⁵² The playbook proved to be an effective tool for quickly implementing contingency plans after the invasion had occurred, enabling the US to be better prepared from day one. The playbook also contained coercive threats through the imposition of economic costs. As a former senior US government official recalled: *“It’s going to cost you 10% of your GDP if you’re eventually going to invade.”*⁵³ Ultimately this threat was not enough to deter Russia. The potency of this threat, and whether it should only be carried out *ex post*, was debated among officials in the Tiger Team. The outcome of the discussion was that imposition of sanctions beforehand could, conversely, negatively affect

⁴⁶ Banco et al., “Something Was Badly Wrong”.

⁴⁷ Woodward, *War*, 96.

⁴⁸ Interview 36-40

⁴⁹ Banco et al., “Something Was Badly Wrong”.

⁵⁰ Carnegie Corporation of New York, ‘How Scholarship Can Inform Foreign Policy for Better Outcomes | Scholarship & Policy’, Carnegie Corporation of New York, accessed 18 March 2025, <https://www.carnegie.org/our-work/article/how-scholarship-can-inform-foreign-policy-better-outcomes/>.

⁵¹ Alexander Bick, ‘8. Planning for the Worst: The Russia-Ukraine “Tiger Team”’, in *War in Ukraine: Conflict, Strategy, and the Return of a Fractured World*, ed. Hal Brands (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024), 144, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/oa_edited_volume/chapter/3881922.

⁵² Bick, ‘8. Planning for the Worst’, 146–47.

⁵³ Interview 25

Putin's calculus because the threat would then lose its deterrent value. Others, presented with the overwhelming military concentration of forces, thought that Putin would go ahead regardless. As another former senior US Department of Defense official recalled later: "*And so I just don't think there was anything we could've credibly signalled down the cost side that would've walked him off.*"⁵⁴

In addition to the creation of the Tiger Team, the US government also formulated a communication strategy to convince allies and warn the public about the impending escalation. The goal was twofold: to increase both political as well as public awareness (so that citizens would support governmental action), and to pre-empt any potential Russian false flag operations.⁵⁵ To achieve this, the US initiated an unprecedented intelligence-sharing campaign. Classified intelligence was rapidly reviewed and declassified at an exceptionally fast pace, allowing it to be shared with the Five Eyes community and NATO allies.

A detailed warning made for public consumption came on 3 December, when *The Washington Post* published an article detailing Russia's military buildup.⁵⁶ Satellite imagery revealed a significant concentration of military installations, equipment, and tents, along with an estimated 175,000 troops preparing for an invasion. The article invoked mixed reactions. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg saw the publication as a potential deterrent against Russia, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky feared it could cause widespread panic.⁵⁷ Despite the overwhelming evidence, scepticism remained, especially with the French and German governments, believing the buildup was more likely to be part of a campaign of coercive diplomacy that at most would result in a limited incursion. This was recognised by US officials, as one former senior US Department of Defense official admitted: "*The US had some intelligence baggage, you know, Iraq WMDs still loomed in the back of people's minds.*"⁵⁸ A study published by *War on the Rocks* showed that the US consistently struggled to persuade allies, and that navigating the political implications of sharing intelligence remained a significant challenge.⁵⁹

In contrast, the Five Eyes community was more receptive, benefiting from the unprecedented pooling of intelligence that provided a more comprehensive picture of the situation. As a result, Five Eyes members US, UK and Canada were quicker to mobilise and provide support, responding with greater urgency than some European allies. Four days after *The Washington Post* article was published, President Biden held a video call with Russian President Vladimir Putin. During the conversation, Putin once again flatly denied any intention to invade Ukraine.⁶⁰ According to Russian state media reports on the call, the discussion focused on the possibility of implementing legally binding security guarantees that would halt NATO's eastward expansion and prohibit the deployment of Western weapons near Russia's

⁵⁴ Interview 9

⁵⁵ Dylan and Maguire, 'Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War', 33. Dylan and Maguire, 'Secret Intelligence and Public Diplomacy in the Ukraine War', 33.

⁵⁶ 'Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns - The Washington Post', accessed 5 March 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html. 'Russia Planning Massive Military Offensive against Ukraine Involving 175,000 Troops, U.S. Intelligence Warns - The Washington Post'.

⁵⁷ Dave Lawler, 'Zelensky Questions U.S. Warnings of "Imminent" Invasion in Biden Call', Axios, 28 January 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/01/28/zelensky-biden-call-imminent-invasion>.

⁵⁸ Interview 9

⁵⁹ 'Intelligence and the War in Ukraine: Part 1 - War on the Rocks', accessed 31 March 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/intelligence-and-the-war-in-ukraine-part-1/>.

⁶⁰ Woodward, *War*, 96.

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

borders.⁶¹ As part of these guarantees, Ukraine would be explicitly barred from joining NATO. Despite Putin's assurances, Biden left the meeting convinced that Russia was preparing to invade.⁶² This belief was reinforced by Russia's presentation of the 15 December Russian draft treaty with its demands to the US and NATO to respect Russia's spheres of influence, including by withdrawing NATO forces to its 1997 borders, which the US considered unacceptable. This cemented the US' threat assessment as one former senior US government official recounted:

*"Over time the assessment of a potential invasion went up, and this was apparent most clearly by the holidays and early January. Senior US government officials had then concluded Russia would invade."*⁶³

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

*"All of its alleged concerns — everything that it was putting out there in the public domain — was really a smokescreen. They turned their backs completely on the diplomacy that we were proposing at the OSCE, the diplomacy that was being proposed on behalf of NATO."*⁶⁴

In response, the US intensified efforts to formulate a strategy should Russia proceed with an invasion. As one former senior US government official stated, *"Strategic direction from the fall was: we should prevent Putin from invading and avoid granting him the incentive."*⁶⁵ The primary policy response spearheaded by the Tiger Team centred on economic sanctions, with Biden working to secure G7, EU, and NATO states support for a comprehensive punitive package with the goal of dissuading Russia from invading.

On 30 December, Biden held another video call with Putin, warning him that any invasion would trigger "far-reaching" sanctions.⁶⁶ Putin, in turn, dismissed these warnings and cautioned that such measures would lead to a "complete breakdown in Russia-US relations." In response and as a signal of the US' commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, the Biden administration approved a \$200 million multi-phase aid package for Ukraine, while the Senate allocated an additional \$300 million in military aid in December 2021. This contained offensive military aid made up primarily of a large quantity of ammunitions, *Stinger* anti-aircraft missiles, anti-tank missiles, small arms, boats, drones, artillery which came on top of the \$2.7 billion sent since 2014.⁶⁷

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

⁶¹ 'Press Release on Russian Draft Documents on Legal Security Guarantees from the United States and NATO - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation', accessed 5 March 2025, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1790809/.

⁶² Woodward, *War*, 97.

⁶³ Interview 25

⁶⁴ Banco et al., "Something Was Badly Wrong".

⁶⁵ Interview 25

⁶⁶ Woodward, *War*, 103.

⁶⁷ Yousif, 'U.S. Military Assistance to Ukraine'.

while refusing to abandon the demands of their 15 December *démarche*. As one senior US official noted on Russia's negotiating position: *"This is bullshit."*⁶⁸

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

*"This was also about forcing the US hand in saying that NATO membership Ukraine was out of the cards. Which the US wasn't ready to do. But NATO's membership for Ukraine was not possible in the first place, however giving up on it openly is not something we were willing to do."*⁶⁹

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

*"Now we did test the proposition, in the sense that you know, the Russians came with a laundry list, the "treaty" that they wanted, it was, like I said, from the US perspective was not seen as a serious document. Well we went back to the Russians with a whole bunch of proposals to start a conversation about changing the way military exercises happen on the Eastern Flank, confidence building measures around missile defence systems in Europe that Russians believe are dual-use, there was a whole laundry list of proposals that the Russians dismissed out of hand. Now maybe they dismissed them because they thought they were all small ball. But whatever they were trying to get, they set the bar so high, and we never got the sense that they were serious about resolving it, and it felt much more like, for whatever reason Putin believed he had a "window" to take Ukraine, and he wasn't going to be talked out of it."*⁷⁰

From January onwards, the US government began publicly revealing more details about Russia's potential strategies. US officials disclosed that Russia was planning to stage a false flag operation designed to appear as if it were carried out by Ukraine, thereby providing Moscow with a pretext for invasion.⁷¹ Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby stated, "When there isn't an actual crisis to suit their needs, they'll make one up. So we're watching for them."⁷² On 26 January, the US and NATO formally rejected Russia's demands in the 15 December *démarche* but reiterated a willingness to continue diplomatic dialogue.⁷³ In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned: "If the West continues its aggressive course, Moscow will take the necessary retaliatory measures."⁷⁴ The proposed treaty had contained several "non-starters" for NATO allies, leading many to suspect that Russia had

⁶⁸ Interview 36-40

⁶⁹ Interview 36-40

⁷⁰ Interview 9

⁷¹ Julian Borger and Luke Harding, 'US Claims Russia Planning "False-Flag" Operation to Justify Ukraine Invasion', World News, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/14/us-russia-false-flag-ukraine-attack-claim>.

⁷² 'Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing', U.S. Department of Defense, accessed 5 March 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2900932/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.defense.gov%2FNews%2FTranscripts%2FTranscript%2FArticle%2F2900932%2Fpentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing%2F>.

⁷³ Humeyra Pamuk et al., 'U.S. Responds to Russia Security Demands as Ukraine Tensions Mount', Europe, *Reuters*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-destructive-sanctions-wouldnt-hurt-putin-personally-2022-01-26/>.

⁷⁴ 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Took Part in the "Government Hour" at the State Duma', The State Duma, 26 January 2022, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/53300/>.

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

intentionally drafted it to be rejected.⁷⁵ This would allow Moscow to claim it had pursued diplomacy while painting NATO as unwilling to negotiate.

During the final critical months and weeks, President Biden sought to maintain a delicate balance between deterrence and diplomacy. His administration pursued a dual-track approach: preparing Ukraine for a potential invasion while keeping diplomatic channels open in an effort to de-escalate tensions. As Biden stated on 15 February 2022: “We are ready with diplomacy [...] to improve stability and security in Europe as a whole. And we are ready to respond decisively to a Russian attack on Ukraine.”⁷⁶ A former senior US Department of Defense echoed this strategy, explaining, “*We were trying to send a combination of deterrence and reassurance signals.*”⁷⁷ Publicly, the US message began ostensibly firm. However, it quickly softened when President Biden said: “It’s one thing if it’s a minor incursion, and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do, et cetera.”⁷⁸ This led to public outcries of disappointment since it implied that the US was only partly committed to ensuring Ukrainian sovereignty. In reaction to this statement, Volodymyr Zelensky responded quickly on X that “There is no such thing as ‘minor incursions.’”⁷⁹ Press Secretary Jen Psaki rebuked President Biden’s public gaffe the next day, issuing a statement clarifying that any Russian military move across the border would be met with a swift and severe response. Public messaging grew increasingly firm after that, reflecting the growing loss of confidence in diplomacy as the invasion drew nearer.

Within the US administration, discussions reflected growing uncertainty about whether deterrence efforts were sufficient. Others debated whether such economic threats were enough to alter Putin’s calculus. “*Even if there was a 1% chance of dissuading him from invading, we had to try something,*” another senior US official reflected.⁸⁰ But a fundamental question loomed: “*How do you convince an adversary that this is a vital interest if you are not willing to go to war for it? How do you convince them?*”⁸¹ Some officials acknowledged that early assumptions underestimated Ukraine’s ability to resist. “*This was also a failure of the imagination—that Ukraine could defend itself.*”⁸² Others reconsidered whether the administration’s messaging had been forceful enough: “*Perhaps we could have managed the messaging differently. We could have credibly threatened with more costs, but that is looking back.*”⁸³

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

⁷⁵ Steven Pifer, ‘Russia’s Draft Agreements with NATO and the United States: Intended for Rejection?’, Brookings, 21 December 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-draft-agreements-with-nato-and-the-united-states-intended-for-rejection/>.

⁷⁶ U. S. Embassy Kyiv, ‘Remarks by President Biden Providing an Update on Russia and Ukraine’, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, 16 February 2022, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-providing-an-update-on-russia-and-ukraine/>.

⁷⁷ Interview 9

⁷⁸ Myah Ward, ‘White House Looks to Clarify Biden’s “minor Incursion” Comment on Russia and Ukraine’, POLITICO, 19 January 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/01/19/biden-ukraine-russia-527440>.

⁷⁹ Asma Khalid, ‘How Biden Is Trying to Clean up His Comments about Russia and Ukraine’, Politics, NPR, 20 January 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/20/1074466148/biden-russia-ukraine-minor-incursion>.

⁸⁰ Interview 36–40

⁸¹ Interview 36–40

⁸² Interview 36–40

⁸³ Interview 36–40

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

a legal obligation to our NATO allies [...] that obligation does not extend to... Ukraine.”⁸⁴ Biden's statement left Russia with little doubt about a potential US response, undercutting the deterrent effect associated with strategic ambiguity. In bilateral contacts, the US military leadership tried to impress on their Russian counterparts that it would end up in a quagmire comparable to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. This warning was publicly reinforced on 19 December 2021, when David Ignatius wrote in *The Washington Post* about the US considering the creation of “building blocks for an insurgency”.⁸⁵ This was later confirmed in an interview as one former senior US Department of Defense official recalled:

*“Mark Milley, who is the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, in the couple weeks before war kicked off, he talked to Gerasimov and said, you have no idea what you guys are getting into, like you think this war is going to take 14 days, you’re going to be stuck there for 14 years, and it’s going to be horrible, and a massive strategic defeat for Russia, so don’t do it. And Gerasimov was like ‘why are you telling me these things, we don’t intend to invade Ukraine.’”*⁸⁶

Some officials also acknowledged that Russia's warnings about enlargement and the regional security architecture had been left unheeded. As added by a senior US official: *“We need to take adversary signalling seriously. Respond earlier and create more urgency. In essence, they told us for twenty years, and we didn’t believe them.”*⁸⁷ In hindsight, some even acknowledged the overly cautious attitude on the part of Western leaders. As one senior US official admitted: *“Yes, self-deterrence may have played a role.”*⁸⁸

“In essence, they told us for twenty years, and we didn’t believe them.”

Conclusion

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

⁸⁴ Andrew Roth, 'Biden Says He Won't Send US Troops to Ukraine to Deter Russian Threat', World News, *The Guardian*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/russia-talks-of-rapid-ukraine-discussions-after-biden-putin-summit>; Woodward, *War*, 101.

⁸⁵ David Ignatius, 'Opinion | The Biden Administration Weighs Backing Ukraine Insurgents If Russia Invades', *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/19/biden-ukraine-insurgents-russia/>.

⁸⁶ Interview 9

⁸⁷ Interview 36-40

⁸⁸ Interview 36-40

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

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

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