The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Executive Summary

Blinded by Bias

Western Policymakers and Their Perceptions of Russia before 24 February 2022

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The research for and production of this report has been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, not should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

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Executive Summary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NATO Headquarters

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

France

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

Germany

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

The Netherlands

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

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

The United Kingdom

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

The United States

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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