



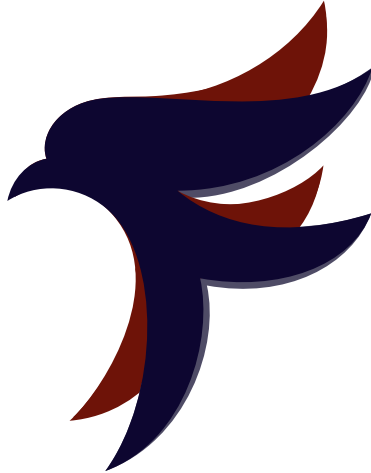
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

NATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

REVIVING THE PROSPECTS FOR COERCIVE DIPLOMACY IN UKRAINE

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СЛАВА УКРАЇНІ
ГЕРОЯМ СЛАВА



“As in so much of coercive diplomacy, many of the critical variables are psychological ones having to do with the perceptions and judgement of the target. The possibility of misperceptions and miscalculations by the opponent is ever present and can determine the outcome.”

- Alexander L. George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*, 1991¹

The United States and its allies in the West have been unable to use the threat of military force to coerce Russia into stopping its war in Ukraine. In part, this is because the West is more concerned about escalation than Russia. Further analysis using Alexander L. George's framework of coercive diplomacy, however, suggests the problem is more complex and deep-rooted: Few of the historical conditions or factors that favor coercive diplomacy are present in Ukraine. **This analysis reveals three things the United States and its allies should do to revive the prospects of ending the war in Ukraine through coercive diplomacy.**

- ◆ First, they should take smaller, more achievable steps which are less likely to inspire Russia to double-down.
- ◆ Second, they should exploit Russia's deteriorating position through a mixture of carrots and sticks.
- ◆ Finally, the West should seek to minimize the intensity of its wider confrontation with Russia and focus on strategic stability as an end in itself. This will be challenging because of the gravity of Russian atrocities in Ukraine. But it may help end the war through coercive diplomacy, and avoid a serious miscalculation with Russia.



Meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs - April 6-7 2022, NATO Headquarters, Brussels. (NATO)

INTRODUCTION

Miscalculation, it is often said, is the leading cause of war in history.² Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine provides more evidence for this thesis. In deciding to launch his full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, Vladimir Putin misjudged the strength of Ukrainian nationhood, the resolve and unity of NATO, the European Union, and the West, and—perhaps most consequentially for him—the depth of opposition to the war within Russian society.³

Despite its resolute response, the West also gravely miscalculated. Its strategy to deter Russian adventurism under Putin failed, repeatedly: in 2007, with Russia's large scale cyber-attacks against Estonia; in 2008, with the invasion of Georgia; in 2014, with the invasion of Crimea and the Donbas; and now, again, with Russia's attempted conquest of Ukraine.⁴ In the months and weeks prior to the invasion, the West collectively doubled-down on deterrence through targeted sanctions against Russia, capacity building efforts in Ukraine, and building up NATO's presence in Eastern Europe.⁵ But this turned out to be a losing strategy when Putin called their bluff and sent his troops over the border.

Yet strategy is dynamic. Since the war began, the West's strategy quickly found a more effective, if nuanced, equilibrium: target Russia's economy, try to make it an international pariah, and help Ukraine defend itself. All of this while avoiding direct intervention and boosting NATO forces in the region to avert escalation into a third world war. This strategy has a small margin for error, but it is already paying some dividends. Russia is increasingly isolated on the international stage, its economy is in tatters, and its initial military campaign in Ukraine has failed.⁶ However, Russia has not given up. Its offensive in Ukraine's south and east continues, with tragic consequences for the local population.

But if the West's new strategy has had any success, it has not been down to efforts to coerce Russia into actually stopping the war. The threat of direct military force was taken off the table early in the conflict by the United States and NATO in order to manage the risk of escalation.⁷ While this may have seemed prudent to many, this situation is a notable anomaly in modern history. In most recent cases of international aggression (e.g., Vietnam, the Gulf War, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya) the United States and its allies have been able to use the threat of military force to at least attempt to coerce aggressors and influence outcomes (even if without success).⁸

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To understand why the West's options have been so limited in Ukraine—and to consider the prospects for pursuing a more decisive approach to ending the war there—it is helpful to turn to the work of the U.S. scholar Alexander L. George and his concept of coercive diplomacy.

Analyzing the West's strategy using George's framework reveals several principles to revive the prospects for coercive diplomacy in Ukraine. Much of this simply relies on the West to keep doing what it has been doing. That means maintaining unity while ratcheting up sanctions and international pressure on Russia, as well as providing military and political support to Ukraine. Yet this analysis also reveals three



Polish President Andrzej Duda and Presidents of the Baltic States Gitanas Nausėda, Egils Levits and Kersti Kaljulaid travelled to Ukraine to meet Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a demonstration of support for the Ukrainian president and his country. (Jakub Szymczuk/KPRP/president.pl)

specific things the West should do differently to enhance the prospects for employing coercive diplomacy to end the war in Ukraine.

First, the United States and its allies should work towards Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's stated goal of "regaining the situation as of 23 February" (i.e., reversing Russia's territorial gains since its invasion this year) in smaller, more achievable steps, which are less likely to inspire Russia to resist and double-down.⁹ Second, Russia's weakening position can be exploited to persuade it that now is the time to accept a negotiated settlement through a targeted strategy of carrots and sticks. Third,

Washington should work to reduce the intensity of the wider Russia-West confrontation, focusing on strategic stability as an end in itself. However, the Biden administration's stated intent to weaken Russia will make this challenging.¹⁰

Likewise, prioritizing stability will be a difficult argument to make politically, given the scale of the crimes Russia continues to commit in Ukraine. Nonetheless, finding a way to limit the wider Russia-West rivalry may increase the chances of ending the war sooner rather than later—which would be in the interest of Ukraine, the West, and the international community.

COERCIVE DIPLOMACY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO WAR



A Dutch-German Air and Missile Defence Task Force deployed Patriot surface-to-air missile systems near Sliac Air Base, Slovakia, in April to reinforce defence capabilities in NATO's east following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. (NATO)

George's concept of coercive diplomacy helps explain why it has been so difficult for the West to coerce Russia to stop the war in Ukraine. George is less well known than his contemporary, Thomas Schelling, but his contribution to the field of international politics and strategy is equally important. His theory is outlined in his 1991 book, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War*.

In his book, George defines coercive diplomacy as "a defensive strategy undertaken in response to an opponent's encroachment or aggressive action."¹¹ This is distinct from Schelling's better-known notion of compellence, which involves taking actions intended to make the adversary change course.¹² In contrast, coercive diplomacy "seeks to persuade an opponent to cease his aggression rather than bludgeon him into stopping."

George saw coercive diplomacy as an alternative to war as it gives the adversary "an opportunity to stop or back off before one resorts to military

operations."¹³ In order for coercive diplomacy to be successful, threats must be made conditional on the adversary complying with the coercer's demands. Non-military threats, such as economic sanctions, are part of the picture, but military force remains the primary currency of coercion. George also saw more potential than Schelling for the use of "carrots" as well as "sticks" to get results, using "persuasion and accommodation as well as coercive threats."¹⁴

In Ukraine, the West has shunned coercive diplomacy. It has declined to threaten the direct use of military force in Ukraine to limit the risk of escalation with Russia (a nuclear-armed power),¹⁵ implemented unconditional economic sanctions and military assistance without assurances to ease off if the Kremlin complies, and avoided accommodations or concessions. Rather than carrot and stick coercive diplomacy to end the war, this approach is a straightforward attempt to compel the Kremlin into concessions through a game of economic chicken and battlefield attrition.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITED PROSPECTS FOR COERCIVE DIPLOMACY IN UKRAINE

George's theory can be used to understand why the West has so far been unable to use coercive diplomacy to end the war in Ukraine. Through studying historical cases he identified several factors and conditions that make strategy more likely to succeed. As it will become clear, very few of these factors are present in Ukraine, which makes the prospects for coercive diplomacy against Russia highly unfavorable.

Two of George's key concepts from *Forceful Persuasion* highlight the challenge: the contextual variables and conditions that favor the success of coercive diplomacy. In the case of Ukraine, the most problematic contextual variables include the nature of the war, the zero-sum confrontation between Russia and the West, and the fear of escalation. The conditions working against coercive diplomacy include vague and ambitious objectives, Russia's advantages in motivation, sense of urgency and escalation tolerance, and the lack of credible assurances the West will remove pressure from Russia if it complies.

Contextual Variables

Of George's eight contextual variables, the two most promising in Ukraine are the fact that an international coalition is opposed to Russian aggression and that strong leaders are guiding the coalition. The Euro-Atlantic front against Russia has been unified and resolute, while Ukraine's charismatic president has rallied the international coalition to his nation's cause and been dubbed by many as the leader of the free world incarnate.¹⁶

The next three variables are less encouraging. The first variable concerns the "the image of war" triggered by the crisis. While the horrific images of war and the war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine have provoked outrage in the West, this has not translated into support for military intervention.¹⁷ Public polling has shown

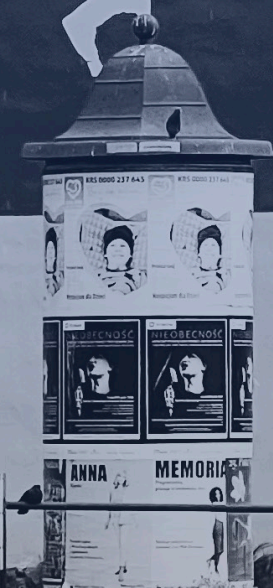
support for arming Ukraine, but not for putting boots on the ground¹⁸ or planes in the air.¹⁹ Concerns about triggering a third world war—including the specter of nuclear catastrophe—also contribute to this risk aversion. All this undermines the prospects for coercive diplomacy by taking military options off the table.

The second variable relates to time pressure and urgency. While the seriousness of the situation has led to a swift and resolute response from the West, the conflict remains open ended, driven more by the risk of escalation and the need to contain it rather than time pressure to stop the war. Time is a factor, but not in the same way it was in the Cuban missile crisis or Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait (both examples cited by George). Paradoxically, Russian losses also work against coercive diplomacy as they tempt the West to let Russia bleed.²⁰

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Third, George suggests an isolated adversary is easier to coerce. Russia is somewhat isolated on the international stage, as demonstrated by the U.N. General Assembly's votes to condemn Russia's aggression and suspend them from

CHWAŁA UKRAINIE



"Glory to Ukraine" mural in Kraków, Poland. (Kgbo/Wikimedia Commons)

the U.N. Human Rights Council. But the reality is more complex. Both China, who signed a “no limits” partnership with Russia before the invasion, and India, who remains reliant on Russian energy and military exports, abstained in the U.N. votes.²¹ In practice, isolation may also work against the prospects for coercive diplomacy as Putin feels increasingly cornered and desperate.

The final three variables amount to George’s worst case scenario for coercive diplomacy: a *fait accompli* invasion “that quickly overruns and occupies a neighboring country” and “a zero-sum conflict in which one either wins or loses.”²² The deep conflicts of interest in Ukraine manifest at two levels: between Russia and Ukraine, and between Russia and the West (over fundamental principles of security and order in Europe).

As such, the prospects for a viable post-crisis relationship with the adversary—George’s final variable—now seem less favorable than during the Cold War when, as George notes, “Both [John F.] Kennedy and [Nikita] Khrushchev hoped to move toward an improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations.”²³ As U.K. Foreign Secretary Liz Truss argues, while the Soviet Union “behaved with some kind of rationality on the world stage,” Putin appears different. “We are dealing with a desperate rogue operator with no interest in international norms,” Truss noted.²⁴ She added that Putin’s Russia “simply can’t be trusted to follow through on what it signs up to.”²⁵ For its part, the Biden administration has articulated its own aims to “punish Russian aggression” and weaken Russia in the longer term—a development which intensifies the zero-sum nature of the conflict.²⁶

Conditions that Favor Coercive Diplomacy

George also identified several conditions that favor coercive diplomacy. On close inspection, few of these conditions are present in Ukraine.

The first and most basic condition is having clear and consistent objectives. Yet the West’s demands on Russia have been inconsistent. They have ranged from the Ukrainian government’s requests for humanitarian ceasefires and

“regaining the situation as of 23 February,”²⁷ the U.N.’s demand to stop the war immediately,²⁸ the U.K.’s call to “push Russia out of the whole of Ukraine,”²⁹ to America’s aim to punish and weaken Russia. These objectives have also lacked conditionality with deadlines, specific threats attached to noncompliance,³⁰ or assurances to remove punishments in the event of compliance.

A related condition is a sense of urgency for compliance—both in the coercing power and the mind of the opponent. Here, the balance of urgency is in Moscow’s favor. Putin’s gamble in Ukraine reveals a profound sense of urgency on his part to act—whether real or perceived. This has been difficult to match in the West, where it has proved difficult to turn general moral outrage into a specific deadline for Russian compliance and drawdown. But as George observes, even if a sense of urgency for Russian withdrawal could be created, it may not be enough. For example, “In the Persian Gulf crisis, a sense of urgency was created by treating January 15 [1991] as a deadline for compliance but...Saddam Hussein preferred war to capitulation.”³¹

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Putin’s urgency is related to another condition: relative motivation between the coercing power and the opponent. As George puts it, “Coercive diplomacy is more likely to be successful if the side employing it is more highly motivated by what is at stake in the crisis than its opponent.”³² Unfortunately, the situation in Ukraine appears to be the opposite to George’s ideal. The aggressor is more motivated than the coercer. Putin is risking everything and has bet the Russian house on his invasion and the subjugation of Ukraine. His simple preference for war over diplomacy



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky tour Kyiv, April 9, 2022.
(Office of the President of Ukraine)

makes him a very difficult opponent to coerce.

Another condition is the opponent's fear of unacceptable escalation. In this case too the opposite is true: The West is more fearful of escalating the conflict than Russia. As Biden has put it, "We will not fight the third world war in Ukraine."³³ The Kremlin has used this imbalance to its advantage by taking every opportunity to remind Western audiences of the potential for nuclear war. However, even if the West was able to summon credible threats of escalation, Putin could easily misjudge or ignore them. Saddam Hussein suffered similar delusions and underestimated "the strength of the military blow the U.S.-led coalition was capable of inflicting."³⁴

The final condition which favors coercive diplomacy is clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement of the crisis. George particularly stresses the adversary's concern that the coercer "will be tempted to renew pressure and push for even greater concessions after the initial agreement for terminating the crisis is concluded."³⁵ This may require "specific and reliable assurances that the coercive power will carry out its part of the termination agreement."³⁶

In Russia's case this may be the condition furthest from being met. Biden's improvised comment during a speech in Poland ("For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power"³⁷) and the remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin about aiming for a "weakened" Russia may confirm the Kremlin's worst fears about America's endgame in Ukraine.³⁸ The fact both sides view the conflict in zero-sum terms beyond Ukraine undermines the chances of a more limited settlement regarding war termination.

For the West, it will be difficult to justify any limited settlement with a regime responsible for such naked aggression and a leader they consider a war criminal. It will also be difficult for Ukraine to accept terms which include giving up sovereign territory and conceding to a regime which has destroyed its country and butchered its citizens. Yet without being specific about what terms might be acceptable, and offering assurances to Russia these will be honored, coercive diplomacy stands little chance.

GIVE COERCIVE DIPLOMACY ANOTHER CHANCE

The West has struggled to pursue a strategy of coercive diplomacy to persuade Russia to end its war in Ukraine because most of the conditions which favor success are not present. However, the prospects for coercive diplomacy can be revived if Washington and its allies can pursue smaller, more achievable goals through exploiting the economic and military costs it has already imposed on Russia, while avoiding a wider confrontation with Moscow.

Many of the challenges to coercive diplomacy cannot be addressed because they are inherent or deep-seated. For example, the type of provocation (a *fait accompli* invasion) that undermines coercive diplomacy has already occurred. Likewise, Russia's advantages in motivation, sense of urgency, and escalation tolerance (which are inherent to the psychology and perception of Russia's leader and regime) make coercive diplomacy more difficult. The West's fear of escalation—another challenge—is mostly inherent, given Russia's willingness to brandish nuclear threats as well as public polling against direct intervention. Equally, the West has little choice but to isolate Putin and treat him as an international pariah. But this isolation may be exploited in favor of coercive diplomacy through a negotiated compromise, especially since Putin may feel an increasing desperation to have something to show for his adventure. This prospect may have taken on new life with Russia now downgrading its military goals within Ukraine to focus on the south and east.³⁹

The most promising area for reviving the prospects of coercive diplomacy concerns the current objectives of the international anti-Russia coalition. To date, these have been varied, ambitious, and unrealistic, given Russia's obvious political and military commitment to the invasion and battlefield prospects that are still alive (despite significant losses).⁴⁰ That situation is now changing. Ukraine's highly effective resistance—supported and armed by the West—has forced Russia to reduce its own aims and ambitions.

The West has little choice but to isolate Putin and treat him as an international pariah. But this isolation may be exploited in favor of coercive diplomacy through a negotiated compromise, especially since Putin may feel an increasing desperation to have something to show for his adventure.

For Ukraine and the West, this development may be an opportunity to define clearer goals in response to Russia's retreat—as Zelensky has now started to do.⁴¹ Recently, Western officials have followed the same script, with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz calling for an immediate ceasefire.⁴²

The most crucial factor in setting diplomatic goals, according to George, is “that the strength of the opponent's motivation not to comply is highly dependent on what is demanded of him.”⁴³ In other words, the greater the demand, the less likely the opponent is to comply. Hence the choice of objective is crucial: “it affects the motivation of both sides and the balance of motivation between them.”⁴⁴ Coercive diplomacy will be more difficult if the coercer conveys ambitious objectives that “infringe on vital or very important interests of the adversary.”⁴⁵ For example, during the Cuban missile crisis, American demands were limited to the removal of missiles rather than the Castro regime or the Soviet presence in Cuba.

The temptation for the West to expand their goals as they see Russia on the back foot will be strong as they appear more achievable. But this may be misleading. While many increasingly think Ukraine can win the war, it is also possible that Russia's rot may well stop in south and east Ukraine as its forces consolidate and refocus on this smaller area.⁴⁶ Moreover, broader, longer-term goals—such as weakening Russia—may embolden Moscow's resistance and jeopardize short-term efforts to end the war through coercive diplomacy. Maximalist goals could also intensify the zero-sum nature of the confrontation between Russia and the West—another key challenge to successful coercive diplomacy. So to give coercive diplomacy the best chance, immediate goals should focus on smaller, more achievable steps, led by Ukraine.

Finding a way to limit the wider Russian-Western confrontation may increase the chances for coercive diplomacy to stop the war in the short term.

More broadly, a return to focusing on strategic stability as an end in itself—through conventional and nuclear arms control, robust dialogue on a new security architecture for Europe, and cooperation on areas of mutual interest such as international terrorism or nuclear proliferation—would alleviate to some extent the zero-sum nature of the relationship which currently dominates. The United States and Russia have shown they can still conduct bilateral diplomacy, despite the war, such as arranging a prisoner exchange and a call between their defense ministers.⁴⁷ Aiming for a post-conflict relationship based on stability and pragmatism may also reveal mutually acceptable outcomes to the war.⁴⁸ However, the gravity of Russian atrocities in Ukraine, the lack of consensus over Western war aims, and the variety of approaches to dealing with Putin—contrast Biden labeling him a genocidal war criminal with others such as

French President Emmanuel Macron encouraging restraint for fear of escalation⁴⁹—indicates how difficult this will be.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, finding a way to limit the wider Russian-Western confrontation may increase the chances for coercive diplomacy to stop the war in the short term.

The prospects for ending the war on favorable terms for Ukraine and the West can also be improved by building on Ukraine's success and Western solidarity to exploit Russia's losses on the battlefield and the damage to its economy.

Much of this simply relies on the West to keep pursuing this course of action: maintain unity while ratcheting up sanctions and international pressure on Russia, and support Ukraine militarily and politically. This means maintaining the current trajectory that has already frustrated Russia's war aims and undermined the viability of a drawn out campaign across Ukraine. This constant pressure through economic and military attrition may force Russia into a situation where its imperatives to negotiate or compromise rise to the fore and the exit ramp becomes more attractive.⁵¹ Again, Russia's regional refocus within Ukraine shows this is already happening to some extent. This provides an opportunity for coercive diplomacy targeted at a negotiated agreement to end the war—or at least small steps towards that goal. The challenge will be achieving Ukraine's stated war aims of returning to the Feb. 23 *status quo ante* in spite of the intensifying zero-sum Russian-Western confrontation.



Meeting of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky with the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda in Kyiv, May 22, 2022. (Office of the President of Ukraine)

ALL COERCION AND NO DIPLOMACY



President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with a delegation of the US Senate on May 14, 2022. (Office of the President of Ukraine)

What does this understanding reveal about the West's evolving strategy in Ukraine? At first glance, its approach to the war in Ukraine looks like coercive diplomacy in action. Of George's four types of coercive diplomacy strategy, the West's approach looks most like a "turning of the screw" strategy, where coercive pressure is gradually increased over time. Initial demands and measures have been ratcheted up over the course of the war.⁵² Economic sanctions have now targeted everything from Russia's use of the SWIFT payment system to its energy exports.⁵³ Numerous Western countries have ramped up to provide Ukraine's forces with air defense systems, drones, armored vehicles, artillery, tanks, and anti-ship missiles to defend itself. This strategy of relentless pressure has been framed by Frank Hoffman as a "comprehensive compellence strategy against Russia."⁵⁴

Yet a closer look reveals this strategy does not meet any of George's criteria for coercive diplomacy. The range of demands varies

widely, from ceasefires to weakening Russia in the long term, with little sense of urgency or specific deadlines attached to these measures. Nor is there any threat of punishment in the event of noncompliance—the measures are unconditional—or any carrots, concessions, or positive inducements offered alongside the array of sticks.

Rather than coercive diplomacy, the West's strategy is simply about changing the facts on the ground. The theory of success is simply to change Putin's calculus by imposing costs through economic and military attrition, hoping to end the war by leaving the Russian economy unable to support it and Russian forces defeated on the battlefield. Thomas Schelling, in *Arms and Influence*, distinguished between brute force and coercion as the difference "between action and threats."⁵⁵ In these terms, the West's strategy has been all action and no threats—or all coercion and no diplomacy.

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY: THREE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The prospects for coercive diplomacy in Ukraine were bad to begin with. But Washington and the West still have a choice: either find a way to end the war through coercive diplomacy or double down on the current strategy of economic and military attrition. With support from many quarters, they have clearly chosen the latter.⁵⁶ Moreover, the strategy has now been widened to include the more ambitious objective of weakening Russia—a goal which now has \$40 billion of U.S. funding and a U.S.-Ukraine lend lease agreement attached to it.⁵⁷

The choice to double down on the current strategy may reflect a judgment that Ukraine can now win the war against Russia, and that the current course is the quickest way to end the war.

The choice to double down on the current strategy may reflect a judgment that Ukraine can now win the war against Russia, and that the current course is the quickest way to end the war. It may also reflect the fact that any attempts at coercive diplomacy were unrealistic from the beginning (due to the challenges identified above). Yet one consequence of this choice is to make ending the war through coercive diplomacy less likely and more difficult than it already was.⁵⁸ It exacerbates the zero-sum nature of the Russia-West conflict, playing into Russian fears and narratives of paranoia about the West, NATO, and the United States.⁵⁹

Zelensky's goal of "regaining the situation as of 23 February" is the right one. Anything less would be an admission that might makes right. But given the Russian regime's motivation,

advantage, and obvious commitment to its invasion of Ukraine, it remains ambitious. To maximize their chances of achieving Zelensky's goal through coercive diplomacy, Ukraine and the West should do three things.

First, they should work towards this goal in smaller, more achievable steps that are less likely to inspire Russia to resist and double-down. For example, allies and partners of Ukraine should encourage substantial ceasefires in specific areas to allow humanitarian aid and civilian evacuations (such as those in Mariupol).⁶⁰ They could negotiate demilitarized zones to contain the fighting, dissuade the use of particular weapons in the region, or start discussions on a negotiated compromise that does not cross Kyiv's red lines (e.g., over the status of Donetsk and Luhansk).⁶¹ Either way, the history and theory of coercive diplomacy suggests more ambitious goals are harder to achieve because they inspire the adversary to resist.

Second, the West should exploit Russia's deteriorating position to persuade it to accept its small-step goals. As Alexander George suggests, this strategy should contain a mixture of carrots and sticks. Sticks could include threats to arm Ukraine with more powerful and longer range weapon systems—including advanced artillery aircraft and armed drones—that would give its armed forces the ability to "carry out a punishing counteroffensive in defense of its sovereignty".⁶² Such threats should be made conditional on Russian compliance and linked to specific goals. They should also be complemented by carrots. Russia should be persuaded with assurances that specific existing or threatened measures—such as sanctions or military assistance—will be slowed, removed, or lifted, if it complies. This factor is already considered when deciding what equipment to give Ukraine, according to the U.K. Defense Secretary Ben Wallace, in order to manage the risk of battlefield escalation.⁶³

Third, the United States and its allies should try to minimize the intensity of the wider Russian-Western confrontation and focus on strategic stability. Here, the horse may have already bolted. Austin’s “weakening” comments will be difficult to walk back. As one senior European diplomat has put it, “It’s one thing to pursue a policy of weakening Putin, quite another to say it out loud. We have to find a way for Putin to achieve a political solution, so perhaps it is not wise to state this.”⁶⁴ It will be difficult to advocate taking a big picture view that favors strategic stability given the extent of Russian atrocities in Ukraine. Nonetheless, history and theory suggests finding a way to limit the wider Russian-Western rivalry may increase the chances for coercive diplomacy to end the war sooner rather than later.

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While weakening Russia may have longer term benefits—including the signal it sends to China concerning its ambitions towards Taiwan⁶⁵—it also comes with shorter term risks which are beginning to play out. One of those is the potential for Western unity to fracture by pursuing maximalist aims for which no consensus exists.⁶⁶ Another is the risk that not every nation stays the course, as the costs of sanctions and energy continue to mount at home.⁶⁷ Of most concern, though, is the risk of escalating the conflict through cornering and threatening an increasingly desperate and precarious nuclear-armed dictator. This could have unpredictable and significant consequences—especially given Putin’s talent for miscalculation. 

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