

Commentary

The cost of appeasement

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The 1938 Munich Agreement ([Akehurst, 1972](#)) by which the Allies allowed Adolf Hitler's Germany to take the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia is also known as the Munich Betrayal or, to English speakers, as appeasement by Neville Chamberlain ([Valladares, 2020](#)). This historical moment reminds me very much of how the West has dealt with Russia since Vladimir Putin rose to power. Like Adolf Hitler, Vladimir Putin has been sending aggressive signals to his neighbours and Western nations ([Putin, 2007](#)) since his 2005 speech arguing that the collapse of the Soviet empire 'was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century'" ([Putin, 2005](#)). Note that he did not mention the *Bloodlands* that Timothy Snyder described, i.e. the killing of 14 million people in Central and Eastern Europe ([Snyder, 2010](#)), or World War II ([Halloran, 2015](#)) as the greatest catastrophe.

Under Putin, Russia's national interest is to regain its Near Abroad, and Putin's policy ([Khalilzada, 2020](#)) is to rebuild the former Soviet Union in one fashion or another. This started with trying to pull the East Slavic people back into the fold ([Britannica, n.d. a](#)), wherever they are. This began with Chechnya and Georgia, and then Belarus, but Ukraine must be gained ([Jensen, 2013](#)). Likewise, Transnistria might be gained, as well as the Baltic states (Estonia and Latvia both have about 25% Russian-speakers in their populations) down to Kaliningrad. Russia already controls Kaliningrad, so what happens to countries in-between that have limited numbers of Slavs, like Lithuania, especially if they are North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members? And what about the West Slavs ([Britannica, n.d. b](#)), especially in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia? Ultimately, Putin also wants the South Slavs ([Britannica, n.d. c](#)), such as the Bulgarians and all the people who used to live in Yugoslavia but are now divided into different states (Bosnia-Herzegovina,

Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia are all states with majority South Slavic populations). If Putin's policy is to rebuild a Slavic Russian Union, then he must recover or at least dominate virtually all the Central and Eastern European territory that the Soviet Union once held, even if that causes a fight with NATO.

To achieve this aim, Putin must utilise strategy, operations, and tactics. Putin's strategy is and has been centred on forcing the West into appeasement, as described above, or the routine and often unsavoury business of diplomacy and statecraft, which others might prefer. Ultimately, however, a fundamental choice faces all national leaders when war looms: do we fight or not? If we fight, how will we fight? From [Sun Tzu \(no date\)](#), [Kautilya \(no date\)](#), and [Thucydides \(Bolotin, 1987\)](#) forward, war scholars have noted the variable types of war that can be utilised, such as open, concealed, and silent war. But Putin's strategy attempts to force wedges in opposing leadership's decisions and goes directly to the heart of so-called realist decisionmakers. Should the leader fight or accede to whatever Putin wants in order to gain something else that may or at least appear to be more important? To build his power, Putin used multiple military or quasi-military efforts, both domestic:

- the 1990s First and Second Chechen Wars ([Myre, 2022](#)),
- the 1999 Russian apartment bombings ([Satter, 2016](#)),
- the multiple assassinations of journalists like Anna Politkovskaya in 2006, political prisoners like Sergey Magnitsky in 2014, and political opponents like Boris Nemtsov in 2015 ([Blake, 2019](#));

and foreign:

- killing Russian dissidents such as Alexander Litvinenko in the UK in 2007 ([BBC, 2016](#)),
- intervening in Ukraine in 2004 against the Orange Revolution, then again in 2014 to take Crimea and Donbass, and now in 2022 to try for the rest of the country ([Beachain and Polese, 2010](#));
- sponsoring a coup in Montenegro in 2016 ([Bechev, 2018](#)),
- using other invasions and military operations, such as in Georgia in 2008 ([Dickinson, 2021](#)) and Syria in 2015 ([Yacoubian, 2021](#));
- efforts to disrupt democratic elections in the United States in 2016, 2018, and 2020 ([Hamilton, 2019](#); [Tennis, 2020](#)), and the United Kingdom Brexit election in 2016.

Yet Putin's strategy of forcing appeasement is based on presenting Western leaders with choices, setting Putin's bad actions against Western desire for Russian oil and gas ([Dewan, 2022](#)), political cooperation on issues such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, the nuclear deal) with Iran, and the fear of pushing back against a rapacious power ([Azizi and Grajewski, 2022](#)). Over and over again, whether Western leaders understood it or not, they appeased Putin, in pursuit of a "greater good" that emboldened Putin and connected Western leaders to his evil.

Moreover, Putin uses a form of warfare we now call hybrid warfare ([Bilal, 2021](#)), which is the use of all instruments, elements, and determinants of power in a coordinated, comprehensive, and holistic way (including violence or the threat of violence) to achieve

political ends. This largely operational and tactical form of warfare is often called the “Gerasimov Doctrine” (Galeotti, 2018) and associated with Russia’s Chief of General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov’s 2013 article “The Value of Science is in the Foresight” (Gerasimov, 2013). It has its roots in the asymmetric and indirect approaches used throughout history by various generals, but in the current age it extends beyond purely military operations. Hybrid warfare is intentionally meant to keep warfare below the level of open military conflict, but financial, cyber, space, assassination, and many other forms of using force to achieve policy (Clausewitz, 2008) (the classic Clausewitzian idea) do occur. According to Clausewitz’s definition, then, hybrid war is war, and that brings us back to appeasement.

When seemingly minor events demonstrate to a country that war is on the horizon, or is underway below the level of open military conflict, but that country’s leaders or its allies in foreign capitals have a lot of reasons (personal, such as the money that rich citizens may gain from continued economic connections; economic, such as the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany; and political, such as the JCPOA negotiations) to hold back from war, the threatening leader may drift or intentionally move closer to a level of violence that his opponents cannot countenance. That is what Putin has done, and hybrid warfare does accept (and plan for) a possible moment where conventional military operations can occur. However, Putin went from the relatively quiet methods of war below conventional military operations to the open military destruction of Ukraine. How does he bring the Slavs together into a great Slavic union after Ukraine? How does he rejoin the “community of nations” after this? Has Putin finally motivated the West to abandon appeasement and fight Russia?

NATO continues to defend its territory but not areas beyond like Ukraine, even as it moves closer to open war with Russia via hybrid warfare methods. The ultimate fear is that Putin has the world’s largest nuclear arsenal and has openly threatened to use nuclear weapons (Friedman, 2022) should the West try to stop his conquest of Ukraine. Chamberlain’s effort to delay Hitler eventually failed when World War II in Europe began with Hitler’s attack on Poland in 1939, but Hitler did not have nuclear weapons. The risk posed by Putin’s nuclear weapons helps support his strategy of using force in the face of appeasement, but a failure to stand up means that the West will always face this threat. Better to stand up now than later, as the stakes tend to grow with time.

Today, mankind is where it always feared it would be. The changing character of war has brought about weapons of great power that can destroy the world, as well as new domains of warfare (cyber and space) that allow for more movement in the strategic competition just shy of open military conflict. But the nature of war, that it is violent and political, remains. When a bully pushes and pushes and pushes, sooner or later you must fight back. Is Ukraine that moment for the West, or is Ukraine, like Litvinenko, just another sacrifice? Perhaps the Ukraine War will give Western governments time to find a way to defeat Putin, or maybe it will just allow the West hope, away from the immediate conflict zone, to prevail a bit longer. This last thought refers to the Strategy Formulation Framework taught at the US Army War College, where, in addition to the focus on values, interests, policy, strategy, and risk, domestic and global factors are also considered. So, rising costs of gasoline, higher inflation, and the desire not to use American troops in the 2022 Ukraine War can suggest that the Rubicon may have been crossed already. Likewise, getting everyone in NATO to agree on, say, sending Polish aircraft to Ukraine, reflects the kind of international factors that come into play. Of course, all this occurs in democratic countries where leaders must worry about voter support, even as Putin’s disinformation campaigns work to divide voters. The passage of time will put pressure on both Russia and NATO.

My view is that the West's "Czechoslovakia moment" has arrived and Russian hybrid warfare has now accelerated to a level of open conventional warfare that the West cannot ignore. It is time for the West to stand up to Putin (ends), in a "whole of government" or DIME (Diplomatic-Information-Military-Economic) way, using means that will cost everyone money, because the risk is so great. I proposed the following when I first wrote this article early in the war:

1. The United States should pass a 2022 Lend-Lease Act for Ukraine ([Watson and Kaplan, 2022](#)).
2. Western volunteers should fight against Russia in Ukraine and elsewhere ([Arraf, 2022](#)).
3. Attack Russian critical infrastructure using cyber warfare ([Martin, 2022](#)).
4. Continue hard and targeted primary economic sanctions against Russia, and secondary sanctions elsewhere as needed ([Landler et al., 2022](#)).
5. Deploy American and NATO forces forward in key eastern NATO zones ([Stevis-Gridneff, 2022](#)).
6. Use a powerful information programme against Russian leadership. No evidence exists of this approach, but Russia has taken significant steps to control outside information ([Troianovski and Savranova, 2022](#)).
7. Defend the United States and the West against Russian cyberattacks and disinformation attacks ([CISA, 2022](#)).

Virtually all my suggestions have occurred, but I will now offer just two additional thoughts:

1. Avoid breaking the NATO alliance when winter comes.
2. Do not return to an appeasement approach to Russia.

No one wants a great European war, but war is here. Vegetius taught us, "If you want peace, prepare for war," even though the preparations might result in a security dilemma that brings about the war you hoped to avoid. The 2022 Ukraine War might be a hybrid war to the United States, but it is an open, bloody, and criminal war in Ukraine. When attacks come, you must be willing and able to respond, or your ability to deter attacks is limited. Yet, you also must be careful not to go too far. On 26 May 2022, President Joseph Biden spoke in Warsaw, Poland and said, "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power" ([Liptak, 2022](#)) The White House quickly indicated that President Biden "was not discussing Putin's power in Russia, or regime change." Still, regime change is always thought of in war, but it can often be a victory, if achieved, with unanticipated and unintended consequences. Remember Germany's decision to help Vladimir Lenin ([DW, 2017](#)) travel from Switzerland to St. Petersburg in 1917 in order to take power in Russia and withdraw the Russian Empire from World War I. Germany sent money to assist this effort, and, in due course, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 saw Russia withdraw and give large swathes of territory over to Germany. Good for Germany, but ultimately Germany lost World War I, eventually rearmed and fought World War II, which the Soviet Union (successor to Russia and then ruled by Joseph Stalin, Lenin's successor) won, ultimately occupying half of Germany and Eastern Europe.

What is victory in this war? Russia and Ukraine have been engaged in hybrid warfare since before 1914, and it can be suggested that the United States was involved in the same way from the Orange Revolution in 2004. Can this war reach an end, with one side victorious, or will it continue on, or will it peter to a temporary stop only to revive again? Ukraine wants all of its territory, to include Crimea, its millions of refugees back, and some form of reparation for the death and destruction. Russia cannot give up Crimea, the base of its Black Sea fleet, and has broader aspirations for the Slavic peoples. Moreover, Russia's actions have undermined its position in the world, crushed its economy, and hardened the resolve of other European countries to resist it. Ukraine and Russia cannot both achieve all their goals, so it looks like victory can only be achieved by one side, but victory is a slippery concept, as noted above in the Lenin example. Often, a clear victory only accrues to the wartime participant that is least involved in the conflict, so in this case perhaps China, India, or a Western actor is most likely to derive victory.

Perhaps that Western actor is the United States. In 1941, Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamota reportedly wrote about Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbour, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve" (military-history.fandom.com, n.d.) 9/11 tested that resolve again, but American struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan left the United States, and the world, doubting American ability and commitment. But now it is 2022, the stakes are very high, as the first great war of the 21st century is underway in a fashion that everyone – except the Russians who are shielded from the news – can understand. Thus, the answer to the question "do we fight or not?" is false, as the war is already underway. The war in Ukraine is a war about the values of democracy, freedom, sovereignty, and morality. There is only one position for the Western world—indeed, for the whole world. It is time for the United States, the sleeping giant and a country founded on values, to awaken and be filled with terrible resolve once again.

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