

*'Now or Never':
The Immediate Origins of Putin's Preventative War on Ukraine*

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Historians like to tell two sorts of stories about the origins of wars.

Firstly, the story of how the situation that made a war possible, probable or even inevitable, came about, a narrative that will typically include an account of relevant background conditions, analysis of important preceding events, and an exploration of long-term political, economic, military and ideational trends.

Secondly, the story of the decision-making process that actually led to war. Wars happen for a reason or, rather, a series of reasons. Historians aim to reconstruct the reasoning that leads to war, usually in the form of a chronologically-driven narrative. The circumstance and influences impacting on the thinking and motivations of critical actors will be integral to the explanatory content of the narrative – the explanation of why someone or some people took decisions that resulted in war.²

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² H. Sugunami, *On the Causes of War*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1996 chap.5 "Origins"; W.H. Dray, "Concepts of Causation in A.J.P. Taylor's Account of the Origins of the Second World War," *History &*

Tudor history specialist, Geoffrey Elton, described this narrative duality as the search for both the situational and the direct causes of historical events. Situational causes are the circumstances and conditions that make an event possible, while direct causes are the human actions that make things happen. Crucially, humans are the cause of all their own actions, not least in precipitating war. Such actions may be irrational, incoherent or overly emotional, but they remain intelligible and re-presentable in an explanatory narrative of what happened and why.³

This narrative approach to war origins is empirically driven. It relies on the existence and availability of evidence that enables us to figure out and demonstrate agent motivations and calculations. That is why historians prefer to study the origins of a war a relatively long time after the event – when there is more evidence, particularly that of a confidential character. The passage of time also facilitates identification of the most significant antecedent events in the run-up to war.

This essay is devoted to the when and why of President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022. As far as possible, it refrains from speculation and relies almost entirely on the record of Putin's public pronouncements during the immediate prewar crisis. That public record is currently the best available evidence of his motivations and calculations. What this evidence shows is that Putin went to war to prevent Ukraine from becoming an ever-stronger and threatening NATO bridgehead on Russia's borders.

At the heart of Putin's preventative war thinking was an imagined future in which Russia would confront an existential threat. The longer war was delayed, he argued in February 2022, the greater would be the danger and the more costly a future conflict between Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Better to go to war now, before NATO's Ukrainian bridgehead on Russia's borders became an imminent rather than a potential existential threat – a statement that he repeated during the course of the war.

Such rhetoric and reasoning has characterized preventative war decision-making throughout the ages. "It's now or never," exclaimed Kaiser Wilhelm II in July 1914 when he urged Austria-Hungary to attack Serbia before it became too powerful, thus

Theory 17 (1978): pp. 149-74; and G. Roberts, "Narrative History as a Way of Life," *Journal of Contemporary History* (1996): pp. 221-228.

³ G.R. Elton, *Political History: Principles and Practice* (London: Allen Lane, 1970).

setting in motion an escalatory sequence that resulted in a cataclysmic war involving all Europe's great powers.⁴

"The world will hold its breath," Hitler predicted when he launched his crusade to liquidate the strategic-ideological threat of the *judeo-bolshevik* Soviet regime. Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser was a new Hitler claimed the British and French when they seized control of the Suez Canal in 1956, while President Eisenhower's *domino theory* had the communists' advance in Vietnam threatening all of South East Asia.

And according to President George W. Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, Iraq's Saddam Hussein had to be stopped before he acquired deliverable weapons of mass destruction and became too dangerous to be attacked and removed from power.

Pre-emptive action to preclude an even bloodier conflict in the future is a standard justification for aggressive war, one that is often accompanied by illusions of quick and easy victory.

To say that Putin believed he had been backed into a corner by Ukraine and the West is not to endorse his perceptions and assessments of the situation. But greater understanding of Putin's calculations may help clarify how this calamity came about, how it could have been prevented, and how an even greater future catastrophe might be averted.

There are many theories and interpretations of the reasoning behind Putin's decision for war with Ukraine. Some see Putin's actions as driven by an underlying geo-ideological ambition, such as the restoration of the Soviet/Tsarist empire or Orthodox Russia's pursuit of a civilizational struggle with a *decadent* West. Others view it is part of a persistent pattern of centuries-long Russian aggression, authoritarianism and expansionism. More parochial explanations include the idea that war served to shore up Putin's domestic regime and popularity. Or perhaps, as some argue, it was the decision of an isolated, egoistical dictator, surrounded by fawning courtiers, who believed Russia's invasion would be welcomed by his Ukrainian blood-brothers.

⁴ "Now or never" was what the Kaiser scribbled on a report from his ambassador in Vienna. See further: M. Trachtenberg, "The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment," in his *History & Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

The limitation of all these explanations is their lack of definite documentary evidence. They attribute reasons for Putin's actions for which there is no proof except a perceived pattern of events that is deemed to fit the assumed motivation. Maybe in decades to come more probative evidence will emerge from the Russian archives or other confidential sources. But for the moment the best guide we have to what was going on in Putin's mind when he made his decisions for war is twofold: what he said and what he did.

Putin's own explanations of his actions cannot be accepted at face value: what he said at various meetings and press conferences in the run-up to the invasion were part and parcel of his propaganda battle with Ukraine and NATO. And his rhetoric may well have masked a pre-existing intention and determination to go to war for motives other than those he stated.

But historical experience shows that while politicians do lie and dissemble – and Putin is no exception - what they say publicly invariably reflects a core of authentic belief. Their rhetoric reflects and constructs their version of reality, warped though it may be. What appears to outside observers as false, tendentious, exaggerated or irrational claims may make complete sense to the actors themselves.

While this essay does not present a long-term, situational narrative of the war's origins, it is worth noting that Putin has his own version of that history. According to him, the war's origins lie in the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917 and Lenin's subsequent decision to include Russian territory within the administrative boundaries of the newly created Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic that became part of the USSR in 1922 – a sub-state structure that, claims Putin, incubated a virulent anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism. As a man of the multi-ethnic borderlands himself, Stalin saw that nationalist danger but did nothing to de-nationalise the structure of the Soviet constitution, while Khrushchev compounded the problem by transferring Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. When the USSR collapsed in 1991 no thought was given to the millions of Russians stranded in Ukraine as a result of a series of arbitrary decisions by the Bolsheviks and their post-communist successors. Post-Soviet Russia was prepared to live with this unsatisfactory situation but Moscow's efforts at peaceful co-existence were thwarted by the machinations of Ukrainian nationalists and their western backers,

notably the anti-Russia coup in Kyiv in 2014 and NATO's subsequent military build-up of Ukraine.⁵

Putin's long-term story of the origins of the Russia-Ukraine crisis was very much to the fore as he pondered and plotted to liquidate what he saw as the lethal threat of a NATO-backed nationalist Ukraine that would attempt to retake by force its lost territories in Crimea and the Donbass.

The Russians' military planning and preparation for the war remains opaque but they must have been gaming war with Ukraine over the Donbass since 2014 when separatist rebels in that region broke away from the Kyiv regime. Putin's final decision to go to war seems to have been last-minute but the groundwork for military action would have been initiated many months previously.

On the eve of the invasion, many astute and well-informed commentators convinced themselves that the supposedly realistic and pragmatic Putin would not risk such an attack.

What they missed was the crystallisation of Putin's apocalyptic vision of a future, nuclear-armed Ukraine, embedded in NATO and intent on provoking a Russian-Western war. Arguably, it was that long-term nuclear danger that finally prompted Putin to go to war.

Incipient Crisis

The specific crisis that resulted in Russia's invasion of Ukraine was short and intense. It began with a series of Russian security demands in mid-December 2021 and ended with Putin's launch of the so-called *Special Military Operation* at the end of February 2022. But that pre-war crisis was preceded by months of growing tension in

⁵ See, principally, V. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," 12 July 2021, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/misc/66182>. For accounts that take a more expansive view of the war's origins than this essay see R. Sakwa, "The March of Folly Resumed: Russia, Ukraine and the West," <https://prruk.org/the-march-of-folly-resumed-russia-ukraine-and-the-west/>; Nicholai Petro, "A True Solution to the Tragedy of Ukraine," *The National Interest*, 21 March 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/true-solution-tragedy-ukraine-201302>; and G. Hahn, "The Complex and Unclear Roots of the Russo-NATO-Ukraine War," *Gordonhahn.com*, 4 October 2022, <https://gordonhahn.com/2022/10/04/the-complex-and-unclear-origins-of-the-russo-nato-ukrainian-war/>.

Russo-Ukrainian and Russo-Western relations, their most salient feature being both sides' military manoeuvres.

The United States had been providing military aid to Ukraine since the 2014 Russian takeover of Crimea. In 2017 the Trump Administration began selling lethal weapons to Ukraine. Western states began to train Ukraine's armed forces and allow their participation in military exercises. In February 2019, Ukraine's constitution was amended to make NATO membership a compulsory government goal. Zelensky, who was elected President on a pro-peace platform in May 2019, did nothing to change that provision and in March 2021 he adopted the Crimean Platform – a programme to secure the return of Crimea to Ukraine by any means necessary, including unspecified military measures. In April, there was a confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian naval forces in the sea of Azov, which ended without violence, but in June the United Kingdom agreed to enhance Ukraine's seaborne capabilities. That same month NATO reaffirmed its commitment to Ukraine's eventual membership of the alliance. In July, the United States and Ukraine co-hosted a naval exercise in the Black Sea that involved 32 countries and in August signed a US-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework, followed a couple of months later by a Charter on Strategic Partnership. Between March and June, NATO conducted *Defender 21*, a multinational military exercise focussed on defending Europe from Russian attack. Russia responded to these developments by staging its own military exercises and by deploying more and more troops to areas bordering Ukraine. Estimates vary, but these certainly numbered tens of thousands by the autumn and increased rapidly during the ensuing war threat crisis. Ukraine responded by substantially increasing its forces in the Donbass area. According to Russian claims, half of Ukraine's regular army was deployed there by the end of 2021.⁶

The first public sign that Putin was getting seriously concerned about the Ukraine situation were these remarks to his Security Council in May 2021:

It appears, and this is highly regrettable, Ukraine is being turned, slowly but steadily, into an antipode of Russia, an anti-Russia, a territory from which, judging by all appearances, we will never stop receiving news that

⁶ Many of these developments are summarised by B. Abelow, *How the West brought War to Ukraine* (Mass.: Siland Press, 2022); and by J. Mearsheimer, "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis" (speech to EU, June 2022), *The National Interest*, 23 June 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/causes-and-consequences-ukraine-crisis-203182?page=0%2C2>.

requires special attention in regard to protecting the national security of the Russian Federation.

As you are well aware, they are purging their political environment...clearly politically-laden and selective decisions have one goal: to cleanse the political environment of forces that call for a peaceful settlement of the crisis in south-eastern Ukraine, in the Donbass, and for good-neighbourly relations with Russia. This is definitely an issue we must never lose sight of, an issue to which we must respond promptly and with due regard to the threats that are being created for us.⁷

In his video address to the ninth Moscow International Conference on Security in June 2021, Putin said nothing about Ukraine but he did stress Russia's commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes with neighbouring countries. He also commented:

Naturally, we cannot but be concerned over the continuous build-up of NATO's military potential and infrastructure in the vicinity of Russian borders, as well the fact that the Alliance is refusing to consider in a constructive manner our proposals on de-escalating tension and reducing the risk of unpredictable incidents. We really do hope that common sense together with the desire to promote constructive relations with Russia will eventually prevail.⁸

In July, Putin published his now infamous essay, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, seen by some as presaging the coming invasion. In that essay Putin articulated extreme hostility to Ukrainian nationalism and its *anti-Russia project*. He also railed against western interference in Ukraine and pointed up the artificial character of modern Ukraine's boundaries, which were the result of arbitrary decisions by Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev. He complained bitterly about discrimination against the ethnic Russian habitants of Ukraine and vowed that "we will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia."

⁷ Meeting with Permanent Member of the Security Council, 14 May 2021.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/65572>. Quotations from Putin's speeches and statements derive from the documents published on the English-language version of his presidential website, but have been checked against the Russian originals for the purpose of streamlining some of the translations.

⁸ Video Address to the Participants and Guests of the 9th Moscow Conference on International Security, 23 June 2021 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/65904>

On the other hand, Putin remained committed to the Minsk agreements, under which rebel Donetsk and Luhansk would return to Ukrainian sovereignty on the basis of their regional autonomy: “I am convinced that they still have no alternative”. The problem was the Kyiv government did not want to implement the agreements because that would contradict its anti-Russia goals.

Russia remained “open to dialogue with Ukraine and ready to discuss the most complex questions,” wrote Putin. “But it is important for us to understand that our partner is defending its national interest, not serving someone else’s...We respect the Ukrainian language and traditions. We respect Ukrainians’ desire to see their country free, safe and prosperous. I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia [which] has never been and will never be ‘anti-Ukraine’. And what Ukraine will be – it is up to its citizens to decide.”⁹

Putin’s continuing commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis was also evident in his talks with retiring German Chancellor Angela Merkel when she visited Moscow in August. As Putin explained to the press conference that followed the talks:

As you know, Ms. Merkel has done a lot to bring about a resolution to Ukraine’s internal crisis. She was at the origins of the Normandy Format, and we all worked together on ways of restoring peace in Donbass. Unfortunately, so far we have not been able to accomplish this. More than a thousand ceasefire violations have been reported since the beginning of August, and Donbass towns and villages face artillery fire every day.

Another matter of concern is that Ukraine has adopted a number of laws and regulations that essentially contradict the Minsk agreements. It is as if the leadership of that country has decided to give up on achieving a peaceful settlement.

When the Minsk agreements came up in the Q & A, Putin responded:

We have no other tool to achieve peace, and I believe they should be treated very carefully and with respect...We are concerned that during official talks and in their contacts with the media, the Ukrainian side says one thing, but inside the country it says something very different. In fact, and I want to

⁹ V. Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

emphasise this, it is enough to look at what the top public officials are saying, and they are saying that they are not going to comply with the Minsk agreements.

Today, I informed the Federal Chancellor that another draft law has been submitted by the Ukrainian government. If this law is adopted...it means that Ukraine will, in fact, withdraw from the Minsk process unilaterally.¹⁰

When Putin was interviewed by Russian TV on 13 November, the main topic was the EU-Belarus migration crisis and the possibility of clashes between Polish and Belarusian border authorities. When Ukraine came up, Putin parried a question about reports of a Russian invasion plot by complaining of unscheduled western military drills in the Black Sea. But he also reiterated Russia's commitment to the implementation of the Minsk agreements, saying there was no other mechanism to resolve the Donbass problem.¹¹

The Crisis Crystallises

The first formal step in the political-diplomatic crisis that preceded the outbreak of war was taken by Putin at a meeting with leading Russian diplomats on 18 November. His speech to an expanded session of his foreign ministry's Collegium previewed the new version of Russia's *Foreign Policy Concept*, a document that was then being drafted. His remarks ranged far and wide - coronavirus, climate change, economic and security issues, Sino-Russian relations - but contained no surprises except that speaking about Ukraine he turned to his Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and said: "it is imperative to push for serious, long-term guarantees that safeguard Russia's security in this direction because Russia can't be constantly thinking about what could happen there tomorrow."

¹⁰ News Conference following Russian-German Talks, 20 August 2021

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/66418>. The *Normandy format* was the negotiating forum of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine that helped realise the Minsk agreements

¹¹ Interview with Rossiya TV Channel, 13 November 2021

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67100>.

In making this point, Putin rehearsed longstanding and repeated Russian complaints about NATO expansion and Ukraine's failure to implement the Minsk agreements. He also highlighted western supplies to Ukraine of modern lethal weapons, NATO's military manoeuvres close to Russia's borders, and the deployment of American anti-missile defence systems in Romania and Poland, which he claimed could easily be adapted for offensive purposes.¹²

Putin reiterated his demand for security guarantees at a December 1st ceremony welcoming new ambassadors to Moscow:

The threat on our western border is really growing, and we have mentioned it many times. It is enough to see how close NATO military infrastructure has moved to Russia's borders. This is more than serious for us. In this situation, we are taking appropriate military-technical measures...

While engaging in dialogue with the United States and its allies, we will insist on the elaboration of concrete agreements that would rule out any further eastward expansion of NATO and the deployment of weapons systems posing a threat to us in close proximity to Russia's territory. We suggest that substantive talks on this topic should be started.

I would like to note in particular that we need precisely legal, juridical guarantees, because our Western colleagues have failed to deliver on verbal commitments. Specifically, everyone is aware of assurances they gave verbally that NATO would not expand to the east. But they did absolutely the opposite. In effect, Russia's legitimate security concerns were ignored and they continue to be ignored in the same manner.¹³

The next day, in Stockholm, at a meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Lavrov announced that Russia would soon present its proposals on halting NATO's further eastward expansion. "Absolutely unacceptable," he told the meeting, is "the transformation of our neighbouring countries into a bridgehead for confrontation with

¹² Expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board, 18 November 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67123>.

¹³ Ceremony for presenting foreign ambassadors' letters of credence, 1 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67250>.

Russia and the deployment of NATO forces in the immediate vicinity of areas of strategic importance to our security.”¹⁴

Putin had a video conference with President Joe Biden on 7 December.¹⁵ On the morrow, he was asked about these talks at a press conference. Putin reported he had told Biden:

Every country is entitled to choose the most acceptable way to ensure its security, but this should be done so as not to encroach on the interests of other parties and not undermine the security of other countries...We believe that ensuring security must be global and cover everyone equally...We agreed to continue this discussion and do so substantively. We will exchange views shortly. Russia will put its thoughts down on paper literally within a few days, maybe within a week. We will submit them to the American side for review...I want to stress once again: the conversation was very open, substantive and, I would say, constructive. In any case, I hope that this is how the American side assesses the results of our meeting.

When a Russian journalist asked him directly if Russia was going to attack Ukraine, Putin told him the question was provocative:

We are bound to be concerned over the prospect of Ukraine’s potential accession to NATO because this will be followed by the deployment of corresponding troop contingents, bases and weapons that threaten us... How can we not think about this? This is exactly what our talks dealt with. Let me repeat again: we have agreed to create a relevant structure that will be in a position to address this problem practically and thoroughly and will present relevant proposals. I must admit that the US President put forward this idea. I agreed with it and said we will soon submit our ideas and proposals in this regard. I realise they will understandably evoke

¹⁴ Statement by Mr Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the 28th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Stockholm, 2 December 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/c/506840.pdf>.

¹⁵ Meeting with President Joseph Biden, 7 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67315>.

heightened interest among the Russian, European and international public. We will, of course, do this as publicly as we can.¹⁶

True to his word, Russia's written proposals on security guarantees were published on 17 December and presented to the United States and then to NATO. These demanded a formal end to NATO expansion and restrictions on western deployments of troops and weaponry in Eastern Europe.¹⁷

On 21 December, Putin told an expanded meeting of his Defence Ministry's Board that it was "extremely alarming that elements of the US global defence system are being deployed near Russia...If this infrastructure continues to move forward, and if US and NATO military systems are deployed in Ukraine, their flight time to Moscow will be only 7-10 minutes, or even five minutes for hypersonic systems." Russia required legal guarantees, said Putin, not verbal assurances that NATO expansion would stop, because "fine words and promises" had not halted five waves of the western bloc's eastward expansion. If western states persisted with their policies, Russia would "take appropriate military-technical measures and will have a tough response to their unfriendly steps."¹⁸

Two days later, at his annual press conference, Putin's ire was directed at Ukraine, accusing Kyiv of creating an *anti-Russia* on its territory and of contemplating military action to retake control of Donetsk and Luhansk: "under cover of new weapons systems radicals may well decide to settle the Donbass issue, as well as the Crimean issue, by military means."

Responding to a direct question from a foreign journalist as to whether he intended to invade Ukraine, Putin said that Russia's actions would depend on the

¹⁶ Joint News Conference with Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, 8 December 2021 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67320>.

¹⁷ [Draft] Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees," 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en&TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab200089e5e1b97d09c2606ac7850ae1cbb5fe885e3cc9ee1d8ce3fac453c388b7c2ee086f1d522914300058f6a40cd82867c5bf2f3693a329e30181da4157d655f5ba298424da863cd3ba13d62ba95585bce2eba65cdd5e7a57a6693a329e30181da4157d655f5ba298424da863cd3ba13d62ba95585bce2eba65cdd5e7a57a6

¹⁸ Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, 21 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67402>.

existence of unconditional guarantees of its security. Pressed by the same journalist on what the west didn't understand about the Russian position, he said:

You know, sometimes I get the feeling that we live in different worlds. They told us there would be no expansion but they expanded. They promised us equal guarantees but this equal security has failed to materialise. In 1918 an aide to President Woodrow Wilson said it would be a relief for the entire world if instead of one huge Russia, there was a separate state in Siberia and another four in Europe. In 1991 we divided ourselves into 15 but it seems even this was not enough for our partners. They believe that Russia is still too big, even after the Soviet Union collapsed, and we were left with just 146 million people. I believe this is the only way to explain their unrelenting pressure.

At the same time, Putin did note the generally positive western response to the idea of discussions about Russia's security proposals: "Our American partners are telling us that they are ready to launch this conversation by starting talks early next year in Geneva. Both sides have appointed representatives. I hope that the situation develops in this very direction."¹⁹

Putin had another upbeat telephone conversation with Biden on 30 December, during which he explained Russia's security proposals, stressing that "the security of any nation cannot be ensured unless the principle of indivisible security is strictly observed."

According to the Kremlin's report of the conversation "both leaders expressed willingness to engage in a serious and substantive dialogue on these issues" at negotiations that would take place in Geneva on 9-10 January 2022 and then as part of the Russia-NATO Council in Brussels on 12 January 2022. The two presidents agreed to personally supervise these negotiating tracks and to focus on reaching results quickly.

¹⁹ Vladimir Putin's annual news conference, 23 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>.

For his part, Biden emphasised that “Russia and the US shared a special responsibility for ensuring stability in Europe and the whole world.”²⁰

The Crisis Intensifies

During January there was some negotiating progress on arms control measures and on Russia’s demand that the rights of states to join military alliances should be balanced by the *indivisibility of security*, i.e. that sovereign decisions should not endanger the security of other countries. However, on 26 January, the West rejected Russia’s central demand for a written guarantee that Ukraine would not join NATO.²¹

Putin was bitterly disappointed. At a joint press conference with Hungary’s Premier, Victor Orban, on 1 February, he complained that “fundamental Russian concerns” were being ignored. Asked how he would respond to this situation, Putin replied:

Listen attentively to what I am saying. It is written into Ukraine’s doctrines that it wants to take Crimea back, by force if necessary. This is not what Ukrainian officials say in public. This is written in their documents.

Suppose Ukraine is a NATO member. It will be filled with weapons, modern offensive weapons will be deployed on its territory just like in Poland and Romania – who is going to prevent this? Suppose it starts operations in Crimea, not to mention Donbass. Crimea is sovereign Russian territory. We consider this matter settled. Imagine that Ukraine is a NATO country and starts these military operations. What are we supposed to do? Fight against the NATO bloc? Has anyone given at least some thought to this? Apparently not.

He then claimed that:

The United States is not that concerned about Ukraine’s security. Its main goal is to contain Russia’s development. This is the whole point. In this sense, Ukraine is simply a tool to reach this goal.

²⁰ Telephone conversation with US President Joseph Biden, 30 December 2021
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67487>

²¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-delivers-written-reply-to-russia-on-security-demands/>

This can be done in different ways: by drawing us into some armed conflict, or compelling US allies in Europe to impose tough sanctions on us...or by drawing Ukraine into NATO, deploying attack weapons there and encouraging some Banderites to resolve the issues of Donbass or Crimea by force...

We need to find a way to ensure the interests and security of all parties to this process: Ukraine, the other European countries and Russia. But this can only be done if the documents we proposed undergo a serious, thoughtful analysis.²²

On 4 February, Putin travelled to Beijing for the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. While there he signed a Chinese-Russian statement on the “new era of international relations.” The document did not mention Ukraine, even in passing, but it did state:

Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext...The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries...The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.²³

On 7 February, in Moscow, Putin met French President Emmanuel Macron. The two men spoke for nearly six hours and at their follow-on press conference Putin rehearsed at length the Russian view of the roots of the current crisis: NATO expansion, Kyiv’s failure to implement the Minsk agreements, NATO and the US’s aggressive character (Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria), and Ukraine’s domestic discrimination against Russian speakers. Asked point blank if he intended to invade Ukraine, Putin replied: “We are categorically opposed to NATO’s eastward expansion...It is not us moving towards NATO but NATO moving towards us.” He also reiterated the point that Ukraine’s membership of NATO was dangerous because

²² News conference following Russian-Hungarian talks, 1 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67690>.

²³ Chinese-Russian statement, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

at some point in the future it might attempt to reoccupy Crimea and the Donbass by force and thereby spark a broader Russian-Western conflict.

Asked what he would do next, Putin said that Russia would draft a response to the documents it had received from NATO and Washington. He characterised the western documents as full of “political clichés and proposals concerning minor issues” but did not think the dialogue would end there.²⁴

On 12 February 2022, Putin spoke to Macron on the telephone and “once again drew attention to the absence of a substantive response from the United States and NATO to the Russian initiatives” and also stressed “the reluctance of the leading western powers to prompt the Kiev authorities to implement the Minsk agreements.”²⁵

In a televised meeting with Lavrov on 14 February, Putin asked his foreign minister: “Do you think we still have a chance of coming to terms with our partners on the key problems of our concern or is this simply an attempt to drag us into an endless negotiating process with no logical conclusion?”

“I must say that there is always a chance,” replied Lavrov. “I think our opportunities are far from exhausted. Of course, [negotiations] should not be endless, but I think we should still continue to pursue and build on them at this point.”²⁶

The next day, Olaf Scholz, the new German Chancellor, arrived in Moscow for talks. At their joint press conference Putin said that Russia’s security proposals were a package and all the fundamental issues needed to be negotiated together. In other words, as far as he was concerned, a formal end to NATO expansion remained integral to the discussion. Asked about the Russian State Duma’s request that he recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, Putin indicated that he felt a solution within

²⁴ News conference following Russian-French talks, 8 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67735>.

²⁵ Telephone conversation with President of France Emmanuel Macron, 12 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67759>.

²⁶ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s working meeting with President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, 14 February 2022. https://mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1798349/

the Minsk framework was still possible, providing the French and German signatories to the agreements brought their influence to bear on Kyiv.²⁷

Lavrov handed the official Russian response to the western counter-proposals of late January to the US ambassador in Moscow on 17 February. The document warned, once again, that in the absence of legally binding security guarantees, Russia would resort to “military-technical means.”²⁸

Was this a genuine diplomatic demarche or had Putin already taken the decision for war?

Decision for War

The final trigger for war might have been President Zelensky’s defiant speech to the Munich Security Conference on 19 February, in which he threatened Ukrainian re-acquisition of nuclear weapons. As Gordon Hahn has pointed out, there were no western protests at Zelensky’s threat to abrogate both the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Ukraine’s nuclear status and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to which Ukraine was also a signatory.²⁹

Another crucial contingency was a significant uptick in ceasefire violations along the border between Kyiv-controlled Ukraine and Donetsk and Luhansk.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, during the 8-year (2014-2021) conflict between Kyiv and the Donbass separatists there were an estimated 51,000-54,000 war-related casualties, of which 14,200-14,400 were fatalities, including at least 3,404 civilians.³⁰

²⁷ News conference following Russian-German talks, 15 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67774>.

²⁸ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/17/russia-will-be-forced-to-respond-if-us-does-not-engage-on-security-demands-a76439>.

²⁹ Hahn, “The Complex and Unclear Roots of the Russo-NATO-Ukraine War.”

³⁰ https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf. In general, see D.R. Marples (ed), *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas* (CEU Press, 2022).

Between 17-21 February, there were hundreds and then thousands of explosions and other ceasefire violations³¹ and on 18 February the authorities in Donetsk and Luhansk began to evacuate civilians to Russia.

Needless to say, both sides blamed each other for the escalation. Maybe, as the Ukrainians claimed, this was a deliberate provocation by the Donbass rebels, but as David C. Hendrickson pointed out, the great majority of the shelling originated from the Ukrainian side of the ceasefire line.³² Whoever was responsible, it added greatly to the tension at a critical moment.

On 21 February, Putin convened a televised meeting of the Russian Federation's Security Council to advise him on how he should respond to a communist-sponsored Duma resolution calling for recognition of the independence of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. A council recommendation in favour of recognition was a foregone conclusion but viewed in its entirety the discussion seems less staged and more open than the impression given by western media reporting, suggesting that while Putin himself may have already made up his mind to go to war he had yet to tell his government.

In his prefatory remarks Putin once again stressed the danger that Ukraine would eventually become a member of NATO and then stage an attack on Crimea that would draw Russia into a broader conflict with the western alliance.

Lavrov spoke first and reported that while the west had rejected Russia's major proposals and arguments, there had been some progress in talks about reducing military tensions. Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff, Dmitry Kozak, then spoke about the futility of the Minsk agreement discussions with Ukraine, France and Germany: Ukraine did not want the Donbass back on Minsk's terms of regional autonomy, and western states were more than happy for the situation to remain a *frozen conflict*.

Alexander Bortnikov, the Head of the Federal Security Service, reported on intensified Ukrainian shelling of Donetsk and Luhansk, as did Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu, who added that Ukraine had concentrated nearly 60,000 troops on its border

³¹ [https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports/?filters=+ds_date:\(\[2022-02-01T00:00:00Z%20TO%202022-02-23T00:00:00Z\]\)&solrsort=score%20desc&rows=10](https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports/?filters=+ds_date:([2022-02-01T00:00:00Z%20TO%202022-02-23T00:00:00Z])&solrsort=score%20desc&rows=10)

³² <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-tensions-ukraine-boil-over-200725>.

with the two breakaway republics. Sounding the alarm about the prospects of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons, Shoigu asserted that its equipment, technology and specialist knowledge were far greater than those of Iran and North Korea. He also pointed to “radical nationalist battalions” scattered across Ukraine and saw signs they were “preparing to deal with the Donbass issue with the use of force.”

Former President, Dmitry Medvedev, made a comparison with his 2008 decision to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the short-lived Georgian-Russian war of that year. The situation today was more complicated, said Medvedev, but also simpler because Russia now knew that it could withstand the western sanctions that would inevitably result if it recognised Donetsk and Luhansk. In any event, Russian-Western tensions would eventually subside, and discussions about strategic security issues would resume.

In his contribution, the Chair of the Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, pointed out that the resolution to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk had been supported by 351 out of 450 members of parliament, while the Chair of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, spoke of the unfolding “humanitarian catastrophe” in the Donbass.

The Secretary of the Council, Nikolai Patrushev, was convinced the Americans wanted to “collapse” the Russian Federation but he still favoured another summit with President Biden in order to allow one last chance to implement the Minsk agreements. In a highly revealing statement, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said that he and his government, anticipating recognition of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR), had been “preparing for months” its response to possible western sanctions.

Sergey Naryshkin, the Director of Foreign Intelligence, claimed the “thesis” that Russia plans to invade Ukraine was American war propaganda designed to provoke Kyiv into yet another attempt to resolve the Donbass problem by force. Nevertheless, he, too, favoured one last approach to the United States. Questioned by Putin as to whether he favoured starting a negotiating process or recognising DPR and LPR sovereignty, Naryshkin stumbled and said he favoured incorporation of the two republics into Russia but corrected himself when Putin pointed out this was not the proposal on the table.

The final council speaker was Interior Minister, Vladimir Kolokoltsev, who proposed the two republics should be recognised within the administrative boundaries they had occupied before their split from Ukraine i.e. the greater Donbass area.

At the end of the meeting Putin asked Lavrov, Shoigu and Bortnikov to state formally if they favoured recognition. All answered in the affirmative, as did Viktor Zolotov, the head of the Russian National Guard, who accused the Americans of “rushing weapons to Ukraine and trying to create nuclear arsenals that will backfire on us in the future.”³³

A few hours later a visibly troubled and emotional Putin returned to the television screen to tell his compatriots that he had decided to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk and to sign mutual assistance treaties with the two republics. Trained as a lawyer, Putin had always been a stickler when it came to legal matters. The treaties with the two rebel republics meant that Russia could legitimately and legally assist them in countering Ukrainian aggression.

Putin’s preceding address left little room for doubt that he had decided to go to war. The only question was how big and ambitious the military operation would be.

In analysing what appears to have been an extempore speech by Putin, some commentators have focused on the first half of the address in which he recapitulated and radicalised his previous statements on the history and nature of the Ukrainian state. Modern Ukraine, said Putin, was a creation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who had imposed arbitrary administrative borders that separated millions of Russians from their homeland and facilitated the development of extremist Ukrainian nationalism. The Ukrainian state that had emerged from the ruins of the USSR was corrupt and oligarchic and its statehood served as a cover for the pillage and exploitation of its people. Egged on by foreign states, ultra-nationalists took advantage of justified public anger and staged the 2014 Maidan coup. Under cover of patriotism the Ukrainian state was then privatised and Kyiv sought to root out Russian culture and language and repress Ukraine’s citizens who identified as ethnic Russians.³⁴

³³ Security Council meeting, 21 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825>.

³⁴ Marlene Laruelle & Ivan Grek, “Decoding Putin’s Speeches: The Three Ideological Lines of Russia’s Military Intervention in Ukraine,” *Russiamatters.org*, 25 February 2022,

But perhaps more important to Putin's immediate decision for war, as opposed to its deeper origins, was his alarmist picture of Ukraine's long-term military threat to Russia. Once again, the spectre of a nuclear-armed Ukraine loomed large:

If Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction, the situation in the world and in Europe will drastically change, especially for us in Russia. We cannot but react to this real danger, all the more so since, let me repeat, Ukraine's western patrons may help it acquire those weapons.

According to Putin, Ukraine's *de facto* integration into NATO was proceeding apace with the aim of establishing western military bases on Ukrainian territory. Putin noted that a number of western states were still very sceptical about Ukraine's membership of the alliance but he maintained that even if Ukraine didn't join NATO immediately it would do so in the future:

The information we have gives us good reason to believe that Ukraine's accession to NATO and the subsequent deployment of NATO facilities has already been discussed and is only a matter of time. Given this scenario, the level of military threats to Russia will increase dramatically. At this point the risks of a sudden strike on our country will multiply.

Regarding the Donbass, Putin claimed that Kyiv was trying to orchestrate a blitzkrieg against the region. Russia, said Putin, had done everything it could to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity but it was all in vain because

Presidents and Rada deputies come and go, but deep down the aggressive and nationalistic regime in Kiev remains unchanged. It is entirely a product of the 2014 coup and those who then embarked on the path of violence, bloodshed and lawlessness did not recognise then and do not recognise now any solution to the Donbass issue other than a military one.³⁵

<https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/decoding-putins-speeches-three-ideological-lines-russias-military-intervention-ukraine>.

³⁵ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

The next day, Putin answered questions from Russian journalists about the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk. One questioner wanted to know if Zelensky's threat that Ukraine would re-acquire nuclear weapons was real or just talk?

Putin replied:

We take it that these words were primarily addressed to us. I want to say that we have heard them. Ever since Soviet times, Ukraine has had fairly broad nuclear competencies, they have several nuclear power units and the nuclear industry is fairly well developed, they have dedicated schools, there is everything there to solve this issue much faster than in those countries which are solving matters from scratch...

They only lack one thing – uranium enrichment systems. But this is a matter of technology, it is not unsolvable for Ukraine, it can be remedied quite easily. As to delivery vehicles, they have old Soviet-made Tochka-U missiles with a range of 110 kilometres. This is also not a problem in view of the competencies, say, at Yuzhmash, which used to manufacture intercontinental ballistic missiles for the Soviet Union.

What is the threat to us? The appearance of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine is a strategic threat to us. Because the range can be extended from 110 kilometres to 300, to 500 – and that is it, Moscow will be in the strike zone. This is a strategic threat to us. And that is how we took it. We definitely must and will take it very seriously.³⁶

A couple days later, on 24 February, in yet another televised address, Putin invoked a redolent historical analogy in defence of his decision to launch a Special Military Operation against Ukraine. In 1940 and 1941, said Putin, the Soviet Union had gone to great lengths to prevent or at least delay war with Nazi Germany. To that end the USSR had restrained its preparations to meet Hitler's attack and when Stalin finally did heed the advice of his generals, it was too late. "The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake which came at a high cost for our people. In the first months after hostilities broke out, we lost vast territories

³⁶ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67838>

of strategic importance, as well as millions of lives. We will not make this mistake a second time. We have no right to do so.”³⁷

Shortly after, at a meeting with representatives of Russian business circles, Putin told the gathering:

What is happening is a forced measure. There were simply no chances left for taking a different course of action. The security risks that had been created were so high that it was impossible to respond by other means. All attempts had come to nothing...This was a forced measure because risks could have created for us to the extent that it would have been impossible to conceive how our country could even exist in the future.³⁸

A Preventable War

In making his decision for war many factors and feelings must have featured in Putin’s thinking: global and local contexts, strategic and political calculations, historical and immediate experiences of his dealings with Ukraine and the West. Doubtless, his professed fears of a future, nuclear-armed Ukraine were overstated, but the unfolding public narrative of his path to war strongly suggests that this may have been the factor that tipped the balance of his calculations in favour of an invasion.

After the launch of the *Special Military Operation*, some pro-Russia commentators began to argue that it was a pre-emptive strike against an imminent Ukrainian attack on Donetsk and Luhansk. There is no evidence for such a claim, and neither has Putin resiled from his stated position that the SMO was launched to avert a dire medium-term threat to Russia’s national security. On 16 September 2022, he told a group of Russian journalists:

[Western states] have always been seeking the dissolution of our country – this is very true. It is unfortunate that at some point they decided to use Ukraine for these purposes. In effect...we launched our special military operation to prevent events from taking this turn. This is what some US-led

³⁷ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 24 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

³⁸ Meeting with representatives of Russian business circles, 24 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67846>.

Western countries have always been seeking – to create an anti-Russia enclave and rock the boat, threaten Russia from this direction. In essence, our main goal is to prevent such developments.³⁹

The course of the actual war can only have served to confirm the perceived correctness of Putin's calculation. Ukraine's military proved to be far stronger and tougher than anyone imagined. Western sanctions and NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine must seem to him to be incontrovertible evident of the collective West's malign intent. How badly, Putin might well have asked himself, would the war have gone had it been fought in five- or ten-years' time?

When, in October 2022, Putin was asked if he had any regrets about going to war with Ukraine, he replied:

I want everyone to understand. What is happening today is unpleasant, to put it mildly, but we would have got the same thing a bit later but in worse conditions for us, that's all.

So my actions were the right ones at the right time.⁴⁰

At a meeting with historians and religious representatives in November 2022, Putin revisited the analogy with 22 June 1941:

We took responsibility in order to prevent a much more difficult situation. We remembered and still remember what happened in 1941 when, despite intelligence reports on an inevitable attack against the Soviet Union, the necessary defence measures were delayed, and a heavy price was paid for the victory over Nazism.⁴¹

Could war have been prevented by a Russian-Western deal that halted NATO expansion and neutralised Ukraine in return for solid guarantees of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty? Quite possibly. No war is inevitable until the moment of decision. That was as true in February 2022 as it was in July 1914. A constant theme of Putin's public discourse throughout the pre-invasion crisis was his extreme distrust

³⁹ News Conference following Visit to Uzbekistan, 16 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69366>.

⁴⁰ Answers to media questions, Kazakhstan, 14 October 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69604>

⁴¹ Meeting with historians and representatives of Russia's traditional religions, 4 November 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69781>

of the west, especially the United States. Significant western concessions in relation to Russia's security concerns might have assuaged his darkest forebodings and persuaded him that the risks of peace were lower than those of war. That they did not doesn't mean that they couldn't have.