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Answering Four Hard Questions About Russia's War in Ukraine

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What's new? Western governments backing Kyiv in the Russo-Ukrainian war must wrestle with four persistent questions: what is the risk Russia will use nuclear weapons? Can diplomacy at this stage help end the war? Would a ceasefire right now be welcome? Could a change in Russia's government bring peace?

Why did it happen? After its massive assault on Ukraine, Moscow has stumbled in the face of unexpectedly successful resistance, but it fights on. It has claimed to annex new Ukrainian territories, drafted hundreds of thousands, rhetorically brandished nuclear weapons and attacked energy infrastructure. Still, enabled by Western support, Kyiv has the upper hand.

Why does it matter? Western powers see Russia's efforts to conquer territory and achieve other goals through aggression and nuclear menacing as threatening their interests as well as Ukraine's. They believe the dangers of accepting Russian aggression outweigh the hazards of continued conflict – including the low but non-negligible risk of nuclear use.

What should be done? The West should continue backing Ukraine while keeping NATO outside the conflict. Pushing for talks or a ceasefire before the parties are ready to compromise would be fruitless. Ultimately, Russia and the West should negotiate new security arrangements, but at present diplomacy will be most helpful in managing the war's repercussions.

I. Overview

In late February, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, transforming a simmering eight-year conflict into a hot war that has forced millions of Ukrainians from their homes and upended Europe's security order. Confounding expectations, and reinforced by military and economic support from Western powers, Ukraine's resistance has forced the Kremlin to revisit its goals. As Russian forces struggle, Moscow has proclaimed annexation of new territories; mobilised hundreds of thousands more troops; launched massive attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure; and reminded the world of its nuclear weapons capacity. Thus far, however, little sug-

gests it can turn the tide. Western policymakers wrestle with tough questions about the costs and risks of supporting Ukraine. But the fundamentals remain unchanged: for all the horrors of continued war, Russian subjugation of Ukraine would be more perilous for global peace and security. NATO capitals should maintain support for Kyiv, avoid direct conflict with Moscow and convey to the Kremlin the benefits a settlement acceptable to Ukraine would bring.

Nine months after Russia's 24 February assault, near-term prospects for peace are gloomy. Both Ukraine and Russia insist that peace will come only if the other party concedes. Kyiv, understandably, wants Russian forces to leave all of Ukraine, including Crimea and territory held by Moscow's proxies in the eastern Donbas region since 2014 and 2015. It also wants the Kremlin to drop its unilateral claim to having annexed Ukrainian land. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has indicated that he finds the Kremlin an impossible counterpart and signed a decree ruling out negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, although he has since stated that Kyiv is open to negotiations – on Ukraine's terms. Moscow's position has become harder to read of late, though realistically it holds out little hope for a settlement any time soon. Russian officials say they are willing to negotiate. But they reject Ukraine's terms, and offer neither concessions nor explicit proposals, as they fire barrages of missiles at Ukrainian power plants. Ukrainians across the country are facing chronic electricity and water outages as a result.

Militarily, Kyiv has the upper hand, but not yet a guaranteed victory, much less a rapid one. It has made territorial gains in the east, during a September counteroffensive, and in the south, including the November liberation of Kherson, the regional capital held by Russian troops since early March. It has also flexed its muscles with long-range attacks on Crimea and Russia proper – including early December strikes on the Engels and Dyagilevo air bases, hundreds of miles from the Ukrainian border – that revealed gaps in Russian reconnaissance and air defences. But Kyiv's capacity to wage war hinges upon a steady supply of ammunition and weaponry from the West, whose support remains steadfast, though some in Western capitals do perhaps have an eye on costs and dwindling stocks. Ukraine still struggles at times to ensure that all forces are adequately equipped, with territorial defence and national guard units most often reporting shortages, including of winter gear.

At the same time, little suggests Russia can prevail. The Kremlin reacted to Ukraine's rebound by mobilising some 300,000 men into the army, most with seemingly scant preparation. Comparable numbers, at least, have fled the country for fear of being conscripted. Moscow has also launched a blitz of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, aimed at weakening its morale as winter deepens. In early December, President Putin appeared to recognise that Russia was in for a long struggle.

Many of Russia's other moves seem geared to unsettle. It deployed several thousand soldiers and substantial gear to Belarus, whence Russia launched offensives into Ukraine in February. Moscow could perhaps attack again from there, but its combat-ready troop strength (about 30,000, when added to that of Belarus) is matched by Ukraine's deployments on the other side. Most troubling are Moscow's consistent reminders to Kyiv and the West of the risks of escalation, invoking its own nuclear capabilities, accusing Ukraine of planning to use a "dirty bomb" and raising worries about a false flag operation. In late October, President Putin appeared to walk some

of those threats back, though in early December, he warned the risk of nuclear war was rising, while suggesting that Russia was all too cognisant of the danger.

The upshot is that the battlefield remains bitterly contested. The Kremlin appears to be banking on its partial mobilisation to contain further Ukrainian offensives as winter cold, soggy weather and mud complicate operations for both sides. Having lost Kherson, Moscow may expect Ukraine to try cutting off the land bridge of captured Ukrainian territory that connects Russian-held areas of Donbas and Russia proper to the annexed peninsula of Crimea. By moving its most capable forces east of the Dnipro river, it looks to be digging in – though some of those units have reportedly gone to Donetsk to fortify Russia's forces there. If, as fighting continues, Russia's troops have trouble holding the line, Moscow could decide to escalate further, with another draft, even wider attacks on civilian infrastructure or, possibly, at a last gasp – though the risk remains low – a nuclear strike. Alternatively, it could change its approach to negotiations.

Against this backdrop, this briefing addresses four questions at the centre of policy debates in Western capitals. It focuses on the risk of nuclear escalation; the role diplomacy can play at this stage of the conflict; the possible utility of a ceasefire pending broader peace talks; and prospects that a change of government in Moscow might ease the path to peace. The answers, while hardly comforting, should shape Western policy:

- ❑ The risk of nuclear war, while still low, is real enough and must be carefully managed. Still, it is not a persuasive argument for allowing Russia to achieve its objectives through aggression and nuclear menacing. As things stand, the precedent created by making major concessions to Russia would be more dangerous than continuing war. The risk of nuclear confrontation would, however, spike dramatically if NATO were to enter the conflict directly. Both sides need to take care to avoid this outcome.
- ❑ Calls for diplomacy to end the war need to be tethered to reality. The West, and Washington in particular, should keep the door open to talks. They should continue to make sure that Kyiv does not set impossible preconditions; avoid regime change rhetoric that would deter Kremlin engagement; and signal that a reasonable peace will lead to sanctions relief. Both Kyiv and the West should continue to look for areas where cooperation can blunt the war's effects – for example, prisoner exchanges, efforts to sustain and extend the deal that provides safe passage for Ukrainian grain across the Black Sea, and arrangements to manage nuclear safety risks at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia power plant. But calling for peace talks when both parties see more to gain on the battlefield, and neither is ready to compromise, is almost certain to be fruitless.
- ❑ For similar reasons, a ceasefire is not on the cards right now. With both parties still believing they can fight their way to a better position, each would demand ceasefire terms the other sees as untenable.
- ❑ The likelihood that a new guard comes to power in Russia and brings the conflict to an end is low. The Russian state is too powerful, the opposition too weak and avenues for pressure on the Kremlin too scant for this prospect to be anything on which to base planning. Certainly, trying to force change from the outside would be counterproductive and dangerous.

For as long as these fundamentals hold, Western governments should keep providing Ukraine with what it needs to repel Russia's invasion. The war is exacting a terrible toll on Ukraine and wreaking havoc on the global economy and, to some degree, world affairs. But NATO powers have judged that to support the grinding fighting in Ukraine, and even bear a small risk of nuclear escalation, is a better choice for them and for the world than clearing the way for Russia to prevail through a brutal military campaign and nuclear menacing. Their calculation is that these costs and risks are the necessary price of preserving Ukraine's sovereignty as well as international peace and security. That calculation is a tough one to make: to some degree, it unsettles other parts of the world. It certainly requires continuous revisiting. At some point, the logic may change, pursuant to events on Ukraine's battlefields and in Russia itself. For now, though, it is the right approach.

II. How Likely is Nuclear War?

For all the suffering the Ukraine war has brought, the most terrifying prospect, at least for audiences far from the front, is that Russia uses nuclear weapons, triggering a confrontation with NATO. At the extremes of discourse about this possibility in the West are two arguments: one that Western backing for Ukraine has set the world on an escalatory spiral that will all too likely end in nuclear war; the other that the West should offer greater support, because Russia is bluffing, has no intention of going nuclear and will back down in the face of Western resolve.¹ While the Kremlin's calculations are opaque, making it impossible to know for sure, the best assessment almost certainly lies between these extremes. Nuclear war remains unlikely because both NATO states and Russia fear it. But it is not out of the question that, if all else fails, the Kremlin might gamble on a nuclear strike. The best course is thus neither to end Western backing – in essence, caving in to nuclear blackmail – nor to dramatically increase it. Western capitals should, in other words, prudently manage the escalatory risk inherent in their support for Ukraine.

A. *Playing the Nuclear Card*

The primary reason that the nuclear threat has been so central to media and analytic coverage of the war is that the Kremlin has made it so. Russia ushered in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine with a reminder to Kyiv and the West of its nuclear arsenal and the possibility that it might use a weapon. On the day of the invasion, Putin warned Western states of “consequences ... such as you have never seen” if they were to “stand in our way”.² Moscow's nuclear signalling grew even more unnerving in

¹ For the former argument, see, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, “Playing with Fire in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 August 2022; and Tatyana Stanovaya, “Putin's Apocalyptic End Game in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 October 2022. For the latter, see Eliot A. Cohen, “Russia's nuclear bluster is a sign of panic”, *The Atlantic*, 4 October 2022; and Dan Reiter, “Don't Panic About Putin”, *Foreign Affairs*, 7 November 2022.

² See “Address by the President of the Russian Federation”, Kremlin, 24 February 2022. Three days later, Putin ordered Russian military leaders to put deterrence forces “on a special regime of combat duty”, which later turned out to amount to staffing up command facilities. See Olga Oliker, “Putin's Nuclear Bluff”, *Foreign Affairs*, 11 March 2022.

September. Putin wove comments about nuclear weapons, and Russia's willingness to defend its "territorial integrity" with "all the systems available to us" through his announcements of mobilisation and plans to annex some or all of four Ukrainian regions partially occupied by Russian forces.³ The seeming intimation was that Moscow was threatening to use nuclear weapons in response to Ukraine's efforts to liberate its own territory, now claimed by Russia.

Shortly thereafter, in October, top Russian officials introduced a new angle to the narrative of nuclear peril by sharing what seemed like an entirely concocted set of concerns about Ukraine. They relayed to the UN Security Council and the defence ministers of the U.S., Türkiye, the UK, India, China and France that Moscow believed Ukraine planned to use a "dirty bomb" on its own territory.⁴ Russia's interlocutors dismissed these claims *prima facie*, as there is no evidence of Ukraine having the capacity, much less the will, to do anything of the sort.⁵ But Moscow's allegations did raise fears that it might be laying the groundwork for nuclear use against Ukraine, in retaliation for a false flag action.

By the end of that same month, Putin seemed to walk back some of Russia's threats and posturing. Speaking at the Valdai discussion club, he indicated that his past comments about nuclear use had been intended to unnerve, and said he saw no reason, as yet, for anyone to use nuclear weapons. He also said that Russia would resort to nuclear use only in accordance with its military doctrine "to protect its sovereignty [and] territorial integrity, and to ensure the safety of the Russian people".⁶

Putin's statements went only so far in reassuring, however, in part because they could be taken as a departure from the very nuclear doctrine he cited. The country's 2010 and 2014 published doctrines state that Russia would use nuclear weapons "in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies" or in the event of conventional aggression if "the very existence of the state is in jeopardy".⁷ Its most recent military doctrine, issued as a joint, "union government" doctrine with Belarus, offers no conditions for nuclear use, but states that Russian nuclear weapons "will remain an important factor for preventing" both nuclear and conventional conflicts.⁸ Other doctrinal documents spell out conditions of use that include threats to Russia's nuclear deterrent forces, but also speak of

³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", Kremlin, 21 September 2022; Vladimir Putin, "Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia", Kremlin, 30 September 2022. See also Crisis Group Commentary, "Walking a Fine Line in Ukraine", 10 October 2022.

⁴ See "Russia raises accusation at U.N. of Ukraine 'dirty bomb' plans", Reuters, 25 October 2022; "Ukraine war: NATO denounces Russia's 'dirty bomb' claim", BBC, 24 October 2022; and "UN nuclear inspectors shut down Russian 'dirty bomb' claim against Ukraine", *The Guardian*, 4 November 2022.

⁵ "Dirty bomb": The effect will be rather psychological and economic", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 31 October 2022 (Russian).

⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin meets with members of the Valdai discussion club: Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 19th annual meeting", Valdai Club, 27 October 2022.

⁷ See "Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 02.06.2020, No. 355: Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence", Kremlin, 2 June 2020; and Olga Oliker and Andrey Baklitskiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'de-escalation': A dangerous solution to a nonexistent problem", *War on the Rocks*, 20 February 2018.

⁸ "Union State Military Doctrine", Standing Committee of Union State, 4 November 2021.

using nuclear threats for deterrence – ie, to convince adversaries to back down.⁹ Putin's Valdai speech deviated from these formulas, although in some cases one could imagine that the Kremlin might view threats to territorial integrity as tantamount to threats to "the very existence of the state".¹⁰

On 7 December, President Putin returned to the nuclear theme. In widely publicised remarks to Russia's Presidential Human Rights Council, Putin warned that the risk of nuclear war was rising and said he viewed Russia's nuclear arsenal as primarily deterrent, even if remaining somewhat evasive on his precise nuclear policy, and also noted that "Russia has not gone crazy".¹¹ In other words, his goal was seemingly to convince the world that Moscow was not the one threatening nuclear war while again reminding his foes about Russia's nuclear weapons.

B. *Global Reactions*

Western states have responded to Russia's comments with their own deterrent rhetoric, although the pitch has varied. After Putin's 24 February comments, France's foreign minister noted that the Russian president "must also understand that the Atlantic alliance is a nuclear alliance".¹² Elizabeth Truss, the United Kingdom's prime minister from 6 September to 25 October, said when campaigning for the role that she was willing and "ready" to use nuclear weapons if needed, though she did not explicitly invoke the war in Ukraine.¹³ (Putin subsequently referred to her remarks explicitly in his as evidence that he was not the one brandishing nuclear weapons).¹⁴

The U.S., meanwhile, says nuclear use by Russia would lead to "catastrophic" consequences, the specifics of which, according to National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, the White House has directly communicated to Moscow.¹⁵ Washington has been publicly circumspect about whether and under what circumstances the U.S. would answer with force – placing it in direct conflict with Russia, with all the attendant risks – or turn to a range of other measures that might include cyber operations, economic responses and delivery of heavier weaponry to Ukraine.

Russia's partners in Asia have also urged Moscow to exercise restraint. Perhaps most importantly, China called on international actors to prevent a nuclear crisis on the continent. According to Chinese leader Xi Jinping, "the international community should ... jointly oppose the use or threats to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought, in order to

⁹ See Olga Oliker, "New document consolidates Russia's nuclear policy in one place", *Russia Matters*, 4 June 2020.

¹⁰ See, for example, Simon Saradzhyan, "Putin's increasingly loose talk on use of nukes", *Russia Matters*, 10 November 2022.

¹¹ See, for example, "Russia's Putin says Ukraine war could be 'long process', insists he has not 'gone mad' on nuclear weapons", *Fox News*, 7 December 2022.

¹² "France says Putin needs to understand NATO has nuclear weapons", *Reuters*, 24 February 2022.

¹³ Kate Buck, "Cheers as Liz Truss says she's ready to press nuclear button and unleash 'global annihilation'", *Yahoo! News*, 24 August 2022. Putin later cited these comments as evidence of Western nuclear threats.

¹⁴ "Russia's Putin says Ukraine war could be 'long process', insists he has not 'gone mad' on nuclear weapons", *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Michael R. Gordon and Gordon Lubold, "U.S. warns Russia of 'catastrophic consequences' of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine", *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 2022.

prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia".¹⁶ India stated clearly that nuclear weapons should not be used by any side in the Russo-Ukrainian war.¹⁷ Despite the generally wide variance in views around the table, the G20 took a strong line on this issue in its declaration at November's summit in Indonesia: "The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible".¹⁸

C. *Assessing the Risk*

Despite the disastrous consequences the use of nuclear weapons would incur – including for Russia itself – Moscow might, if unhindered by formal doctrine, see several rationales for a nuclear strike. Some Russian officials reportedly believe, despite all the West's warnings, that Ukraine and its Western backers would back away from further escalation in the face of Russian nuclear use.¹⁹ If the leadership follows this logic, Russia might consider using nuclear weapons, especially if it senses that defeat on the battlefield is looming and, with it, the chance of domestic upheaval. Hyperbolic as it may sound, Putin's propagandists often suggest that Armageddon is worth risking in service to a global mission of Russian greatness.²⁰ The Kremlin might also judge, particularly in the face of major military setbacks, that it needs to make good on its threats, for the sake of credibility and absent other options. Moscow might also believe it can convince enough people that it is responding to a radiological threat from Ukraine and thus escape global opprobrium.

The risk of Russian nuclear use would become far more acute were NATO to confront Russia directly.²¹ Most Western capitals appear to understand this danger all too well, given their caution in avoiding steps that edge too close to escalation, including their rejection of a no-fly zone after Russia's all-out invasion and their measured response to reports of a missile strike in Poland on 15 November. If Russia were directly at war with NATO, it could conclude that the state's very existence was threatened, which is the central scenario for use of nuclear weapons that its doctrine contemplates. Such a war might not immediately threaten core state functions (eg, an attack on the seat of government in Moscow) or Russia's nuclear deterrent and capacity to retaliate. But because Moscow probably expects that in any such war, NATO would seek to limit Russian nuclear capabilities, the Kremlin might see these capabilities to be at risk in a range of situations that are difficult to anticipate. It might then launch

¹⁶ "No nuclear weapons over Ukraine, Chinese President Xi Jinping says, in clear message to Russia", *South China Morning Post*, 4 November 2022.

¹⁷ "India's defence minister warns against nuclear weapons in call with Russian counterpart", Reuters, 26 October 2022.

¹⁸ "G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration", The White House, 16 November 2022.

¹⁹ Boris Bondarev, "The Sources of Russian Misconduct", *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2022).

²⁰ Masha Gessen, "Why Vladimir Putin would use nuclear weapons in Ukraine", *The New Yorker*, 1 November 2022.

²¹ See Olga Oliker, Michael Wahid Hanna and Brian Finucane, "No-Fly Zone in Ukraine: War with Russia by Another Name", Crisis Group Commentary, 7 March 2022. At the time of writing, Poland judged that the missile incident was most likely the result of an errant Ukrainian air defence projectile. See "Polish government confirms Ukrainian air defence origin of missile", EURACTIV, 16 November 2022.

pre-emptive nuclear attacks to demonstrate resolve or to use its weapons before a U.S. counterforce strike decimates them.²²

For now, though, it seems highly unlikely that Moscow would gamble on a nuclear strike. Even leaving aside the international outrage, including in non-Western capitals, that doing so would provoke, there are strong practical reasons to eschew such tactics. Put simply, a nuclear strike would not help Russia attain its goals.²³ Indeed, nuclear use would serve no tactical military purpose. While the fear, destruction and mayhem that even a “smaller” weapon (ie, one roughly half the size of the bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) could wreak would be enormous, no crucial bridge can be destroyed, or road rendered impassable, only by using a nuclear weapon. Conventional explosives can be used to the same effect without the enormous risks to Russia itself that would be associated with nuclear use. Even beyond the likelihood of provoking a Western response, these risks include the possibilities that radiation blows into Russia, harming people there, or drifts into Europe, forcing an even greater escalation than might otherwise be the case.

Consistent with this logic, Moscow has stayed strictly conventional over the nine months of war, despite its travails on the battlefield and despite attacks on Russian territory as well as on Ukrainian lands that Russia claims as its own, large swathes of which Ukraine has now liberated.²⁴ Western officials are reportedly aware that Russian authorities have considered their nuclear options, but also say they have seen no evidence that Moscow has prepared or is preparing to use nuclear weapons.²⁵ Moreover, militaries generally consider all sorts of options in the midst of war planning, so it is difficult to know whether the reported discussions were significant. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's increased tempo of strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure – horrific in their own right – and conscription of hundreds of thousands of men suggest that it plans to keep its escalation conventional, at least for now.

Perhaps the strongest argument that the risk of Russian nuclear use remains low is that Russia appears to be counting on its sabre rattling in part to deter direct conflict with the West. Russian behaviour thus far pairs nuclear menacing with the reality that, even as weapons for Ukraine are delivered from NATO territories, Moscow has not struck any targets outside Ukraine. Despite its rhetoric, Moscow, like its NATO counterparts, has thus far steered clear of actions that could draw alliance members

²² Anya Loukianova Fink and Olga Olikier, “Russia's Nuclear Weapons in a Multipolar World: Guarantors of Sovereignty, Great Power Status and More”, *Daedalus*, vol. 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020).

²³ The Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), which is close to the Kremlin, explains that although the use of nuclear weapons in the Ukrainian conflict cannot be ruled out, it would not bring Russia any benefit. See “Nuclear Factor in the Ukrainian Conflict”, IMEMO, 26 October 2022. See also Vladimir Frolov, “Strategic procrastination: What's Russia's game with nuclear signaling?”, *Carnegie Politika*, 11 October 2022. Ukrainian defence officials seem to share the assessment that the Kremlin currently realises a nuclear strike would complicate rather than resolve its military problems. Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, Kyiv, September 2022.

²⁴ Most prominently, Ukraine regained control over the city of Kherson and its environs on the western bank of the Dnipro River in mid-November, which Russia claimed to have annexed on 30 September, along with the regions of Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Luhansk. In early October, just days after the proclaimed annexations, Ukraine also liberated the Donetsk town of Lyman.

²⁵ Helene Cooper, Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, “Russian military leaders discussed use of nuclear weapons, US officials say”, *The New York Times*, 2 November 2022.

directly into the war and trigger a wider, even global conflagration. Its actions suggest that it, like NATO capitals, hopes to avoid direct NATO-Russia confrontation, seeing the dangers such conflict would bring. It might seem something of a paradox that Moscow, in attempting to keep NATO out of the war, is threatening to do precisely the thing that would run the gravest risk of NATO getting more directly involved. Nonetheless, the Kremlin appears to see deterrent value in such threats.

D. *Nuclear Menacing and Its Audiences*

Deterrence is likely not the only purpose behind Russia's nuclear menacing.²⁶ As with its large-scale bombing of Ukrainian energy and civilian infrastructure, Moscow also appears to hope that it might frighten Ukrainians into abandoning resistance and the West into stopping support for Kyiv.

In that sense, the tactic has played differently to different audiences. For Ukraine, which understandably sees the present conflict as existential, regardless of whether it is fought by conventional or nuclear means, the threats are largely ineffective and have perhaps even lost punch over time.²⁷ For Kyiv's Western backers, they are more salient. Violating the nuclear taboo after 75-plus years would be a seismic shock to global security, even before one considers the immediate humanitarian consequences, the possibility of radioactive fallout in Europe and the risks of catastrophic escalation that it could portend. Western officials, for the first time in decades, have had to seriously grapple with the question of how they would respond to a nuclear strike by Moscow.²⁸

But even in the West, Moscow's threats appear to be backfiring. While the nuclear menacing has likely strengthened the voices of those urging caution about direct intervention in the conflict, it has not bolstered arguments for ratcheting back support and, in some respects, has undermined them. At least among policymakers, Russia's use of nuclear threats raises the stakes for backing down.²⁹ They worry that any apparent weakening of support for Ukraine would smack of giving in to nuclear blackmail, which could embolden Moscow into believing that it can throw its weight around in a similar way beyond Ukraine. Some European officials now argue that, due in large part to the Kremlin's nuclear threats, the war is existential not just for Ukraine, but also for their countries, which could be threatened in the future.³⁰ This logic has its limits. Russia does not necessarily have the same designs on other states that it has on Ukraine. Plus, even if Moscow's threats fail in Ukraine, it may still try the tactic again, there or elsewhere. Still, if it succeeds in Ukraine, the odds of more such menacing are surely higher.

²⁶ Western leaders and analysts have been well aware of the risks since before the Russian escalation began, suggesting that if preventing this scenario was Russia's only goal, its threats were unnecessary. See Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°92, *Responding to Russia's New Military Buildup Near Ukraine*, 8 December 2021.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Ukrainian officials and analysts, Kyiv, September 2022. According to the Ukrainian polling group Rating, 65 per cent of Ukrainians do not believe Russia will use nuclear weapons against Ukraine. See "Eighteen National Survey: Attitude of Ukrainians towards Foreign Countries (October 8-9, 2022)", Rating Group, 24 October 2022.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, autumn 2022.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, U.S., Canadian and European officials, autumn 2022.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, European officials, October 2022.

Broadly speaking, then, Western governments are right to maintain support for Ukraine, while simultaneously steering clear of long-understood thresholds – such as direct NATO involvement in the conflict – and deterring Russia from nuclear use. The White House, although making clear that it has communicated to Russia how it would respond to a nuclear strike, remains tight-lipped about those plans, at least in public. But it may well have conveyed that nuclear use would have precisely the consequences that both sides have sought to avoid, pulling NATO into a confrontation that, even if conventional at first, would run a grave risk of going nuclear. Western leaders should also continue to encourage statements, like the G20 leaders' declaration in Indonesia and those of China and India, in which non-Western countries make clear their opposition to nuclear weapons use.

III. Can Diplomacy End the War, and If So, How?

Notwithstanding the bitterness the war has engendered, diplomacy among Russia, Ukraine and others has continued.

In the build-up to the 24 February invasion, Western powers undertook a flurry of diplomatic efforts aimed at convincing Russia to sit down with its neighbours to negotiate a European security order that could better serve everyone's interests. They also sought to reassure the Kremlin that they had no intention of admitting Ukraine to the NATO alliance, something that, despite not being on the cards prior to Russia's invasion, Moscow had long described as a threat to its security.³¹ The efforts failed. Russia's demands, which included a return to the pre-enlargement NATO force posture of the 1990s, were maximalist and unrealistic, but if they had been a starting negotiating position, talks could have ensued. Instead, rather than coming to the negotiating table, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³²

Soon after the invasion, Ukraine entered into negotiations with its adversary. At first, Moscow demanded capitulation from Kyiv, which the Ukrainian government rejected. As Russia's military was forced to withdraw from Ukraine's north and centre, however, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators (peculiarly, especially in light of the growing role of women in Ukraine's government and military, seemingly all-male on both sides) began to make progress. In particular, they agreed on specific parameters for Ukraine's future neutrality – an end state desired by Moscow and that Kyiv, at that point, was prepared to live with.³³

But talks soon stalled. Moscow wanted Ukraine to withdraw forces from the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk – which Russia recognised as independent states within their Ukrainian administrative boundaries on 21 February, even before it made additional military inroads into those territories – and did not want to discuss the status of Crimea. Ukraine wanted Moscow to return to its positions of 23 February,

³¹ See "Scholz: Putin started war for 'completely absurd' reasons", Deutsche Welle, 21 August 2022.

³² See "Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees" and "Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December 2021.

³³ "Lavrov sees Zelenskyy's assessment of the situation in Ukraine as more realistic", RBC, 16 March 2022.

as well as to postpone bilateral talks on the status of Crimea for fifteen years.³⁴ The negotiations ground to a halt in late March, when atrocities, including summary executions, rapes and other torture, committed by Russian forces in Bucha, a suburb of Kyiv, came to light.³⁵

Other talks have continued, however – not concerning the core of a political settlement but seeking to address the war's consequences. Moscow and Kyiv make regular direct deals to exchange prisoners and remains of the dead. Other parties have helped facilitate some efforts – notably, Saudi Arabia was a stopping point for Ukrainian prisoners of war returned from Russia, and it assisted, as did Türkiye, with repatriation of foreign nationals fighting for Ukraine who had been in Russian custody.³⁶ A 22 July deal, brokered by Türkiye and the UN, to restart Ukrainian grain exports across the Black Sea, which provides a lifeline for Ukrainian farmers and global consumers and has helped facilitate Russian agricultural exports, nearly broke down in October, but quickly got back on track. It has now been extended for another 120 days starting on 18 November.³⁷ Through its own diligent negotiations with both Moscow and Kyiv, the UN's nuclear watchdog agency has obtained access to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant to help ascertain the safety of the facility, where Russia holds the Ukrainian staff hostage and has established a military base.³⁸

This record demonstrates the power of diplomacy to mitigate the damage of war, and even to end it, but also the need to ensure that expectations for what it can accomplish are realistic. Experience to date offers no reason to think that if the right formula, or the right mediator, is found, the conflict might end. To the contrary, as the discussion above shows, a wide variety of mediators have been engaged already. They have been valuable in mitigating the conflict's effects, and they, and many others, stand ready to help when peace talks become possible. But, no matter who the mediator, meaningful peace talks can take place only when Russia, Ukraine or both are prepared to compromise. Thus far, neither is.

Kyiv is in no mood to offer concessions because it has continued to improve its battlefield position, in defiance of expectations of how it would fare. On 24 February, most analysts predicted that Russia would win a quick military victory in Ukraine. Some argued that Ukraine would resist, and that Russia would face an ugly fight, but these observers, too, judged Moscow's military capability to be decisively superior to

³⁴ See "As a result of talks with Russia, Ukraine expects an end to aggression and withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory – Andriy Yermak", President of Ukraine, 22 March 2022; and "Medinsky names conditions without which an agreement with Ukraine is unlikely", RBC, 25 March 2022.

³⁵ See "How Russian soldiers ran a 'cleansing' operation in Bucha", Associated Press, 2 November 2022.

³⁶ "Russia, Ukraine announce major surprise prisoner swap", Reuters, 22 September 2022.

³⁷ For background, see "Who are the Winners in the Black Sea Grain Deal?", Crisis Group Commentary, 3 August 2022. On 17 November, the Russian foreign ministry announced that Moscow would allow an extension of the grain deal, with no changes in timing or scope, from 18 November. See "Press release on the Black Sea initiative for the export of Ukrainian food", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 November 2022.

³⁸ See "Russian vehicles seen inside turbine hall at Ukraine nuclear plant", CNN, 19 August 2022.

Kyiv's.³⁹ In practice, Russia proved to be far less capable than assessed, and Ukraine, backed by Western military and economic aid, has had Russia on the back foot for some time, disrupting first its plan of rapid conquest that would force regime change and then its effort to gain full control of Donbas.

Moreover, after eight months of war, Russia is in even worse shape militarily than earlier on, having suffered heavy losses of equipment and personnel, including in its best-trained and most combat-ready units, and is now relying on weapons purchased from Iran. Some estimates hold that as much as half of the force that attacked on 24 February is dead, incapacitated or off the battlefield for other reasons.⁴⁰ Ukraine's long-range attacks on high value targets in Crimea and deep within Russia proper, including early December strikes on the Engels and Dyagilevo air bases (which host strategic bombers hundreds of miles from the Ukrainian border), reveal gaps in Moscow's reconnaissance and air defence.

Now, the Ukrainian army, having taken Kherson city and made inroads in Luhansk region, is also spoiling Russia's third war plan – to gain and retain control of those territories that Moscow had declared annexed, even though it is only Luhansk that Russia ever had full control of (and that temporarily). Indeed, Kyiv is confident that it is on a path to liberate ever more of its land, especially since Russian troops have left Kherson, the only regional capital that they had been able to capture since February. Although winter weather and better-established Russian defensive positions may slow progress, Ukraine has little reason to expect major reversals.

Even if his government wanted to cut a deal, Zelenskyy would struggle to find the political space to do it. He must answer to public opinion that is overwhelmingly opposed to any compromise with the Kremlin. September polling indicated that 70 per cent of Ukrainians wanted to keep fighting until victory, and over 90 per cent define victory as regaining all territory held by Russia, including Crimea.⁴¹ As more territory is liberated, reports of the suffering, including gender-based violence, that civilians are enduring under Russian occupation surely feed Ukrainians' desire to regain control of their land. Moreover, although Ukraine's elites are united behind the Zelenskyy administration, the country's dynamic political scene has not disappeared, and opposition leaders would rapidly take action in the face of what they would see as appeasement of Russia. Kyiv's leadership would likely not survive in power, and any deal it struck might prove less than durable, if it made fundamental concessions to Russia at this time.

Russia, although complaining about Ukrainian unwillingness to negotiate, also is not in the market for compromise. Rather, Moscow appears to want only deals that cement its gains and, ideally, more: that is, to maintain its position in the south and east, if not take full control of all four territories that it claims to have annexed.⁴² For

³⁹ Crisis Group fell into this category. See, for instance, Crisis Group Statement, "War in Europe: Responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", 24 February 2022; and Crisis Group Europe Briefing, *Responding to Russia's New Military Buildup Near Ukraine*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ See "100,000 Russian military casualties in Ukraine: US general", Al Jazeera, 10 November 2022.

⁴¹ R.J. Reinhart, "Ukrainians support fighting until victory", Gallup, 18 October 2022.

⁴² By way of background, on 11 November, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Russia was ready to negotiate with Ukraine without preconditions. On 14 November, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko clarified that Kyiv's demand to withdraw Russian troops from Ukrainian territory was unacceptable to Moscow as a precondition to starting negotiations. On 15 Novem-

now, Moscow appears to calculate that devastating attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and reminders to Western states of the risks of escalation will combine with rising energy costs across Europe to shift dynamics in its favour. It may hope that the slim majority the Republican Party now enjoys in the U.S. House of Representatives, and particularly its faction that opposes aid to Ukraine, will erode political support for U.S. assistance. It no doubt expects – erroneously but probably genuinely – that if it can convince Ukraine's Western backers to rethink their support, then Kyiv's own calculus about staying in the war will change.⁴³ Indeed, many in the Kremlin appear to still believe that Western states are forcing Ukraine to fight, even after months of evidence of Ukrainian agency.⁴⁴

As for Kyiv's Western backers, they have thus far judged that acceding to Russian coercion, and in particular nuclear menacing, would be fundamentally counterproductive to their own security interests. Of course, Western states are not a monolith, and debates continue, as exemplified by comments in November by U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley suggesting that Ukraine should seek negotiations to solidify its gains. But Milley's remarks were quickly countered by his civilian bosses.⁴⁵ The prevailing consensus in Western capitals is that if they press Ukraine to negotiate, Russia will think they are driven by desire to end the war, even at great cost. Moscow might then not only seize the moment to press for recognition of its territorial claims, but also, as discussed above, be emboldened to more adventurism, in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Besides, a withdrawal of Western support from Ukraine would hardly signal the end of the crisis. Even if shifts in domestic politics or economic pressure were to bring about a change of heart in Western capitals, which right now seems unlikely, the violence in Ukraine would not necessarily end. Nor would the region necessarily experience greater stability. While a Western about-face would greatly damage Ukraine's war effort, and it might even change Kyiv's cost-benefit calculations concerning negotiations, it would probably not make Ukrainian public opinion more conciliatory – especially since, at this point, the Russian missile barrages do not seem to be weakening resolve. (An October survey found that 86 per cent of Ukrainians agree that their country should fight on in the face of bombardment.⁴⁶)

ber, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said it was Ukraine that refused to negotiate, not Russia. On 1 December, Lavrov said Russia had never asked for negotiations but was ready to listen to proposals for talks. See "MFA says ready for dialogue with Kyiv without preconditions", RBC, 11 November 2022; "The Russian foreign ministry found unacceptable the condition for the withdrawal of troops to start negotiations", Radio Liberty, 14 November 2022; "Ukraine refuses to negotiate, not Russia: What Lavrov said at the G20", TASS, 15 November 2022; and "Lavrov says Russia never asked for talks on Ukraine", Interfax, 1 December 2022.

⁴³ See "US intelligence suggests Russia put off announcing Kherson retreat until after midterm elections", CNN, 15 November 2022.

⁴⁴ For example, Alexei Polishchuk of the Russian foreign ministry said "Kyiv interrupted the negotiation process" in the spring, "clearly at the command of Western handlers who do not want peace". See "Russian foreign ministry: The U.S. is forcing its allies to send weapons to Ukraine", TASS, 9 October 2022.

⁴⁵ See "U.S. scrambles to reassure Ukraine after Milley comments on negotiations", *Politico*, 14 November 2022.

⁴⁶ Anton Hrushetskyi, "Russian shelling of Ukrainian cities: Continuation of the armed struggle or transition to negotiations", Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 24 October 2022.

There could also be other dangers to reducing support to Ukraine. Even if some Western states back away, others (particularly on Europe's eastern flank) would strongly resist doing so, leading to discord within the European Union and the NATO alliance. If Russia subsequently were to act aggressively, in Ukraine or elsewhere, generating a new crisis, the states that had scaled down their assistance would be under tremendous pressure to show greater resolve the second time around – likely creating even graver risks of escalation than those present today.

Against this backdrop, the Western, and in particular U.S., approach to diplomacy is sensibly focused on risk mitigation and keeping options open. The White House has maintained a diplomatic channel between U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Kremlin counterparts Nikolai Patrushev (President Putin's national security adviser) and Yuri Ushakov (his top foreign policy aide) to help both sides manage the risk of escalation.⁴⁷ CIA Director William Burns met with the head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergey Naryshkin, in Türkiye.⁴⁸ At the same time, the U.S. has reportedly pressed Kyiv to stop insisting that the Putin government be removed from power as a precondition to peace talks. In so doing, Washington has signalled its discomfort with a posture that in effect makes peace talks impossible, while avoiding the suggestion that the time is ripe for such talks.⁴⁹

So, under what circumstances might meaningful talks be feasible? Perhaps the most promising scenario – a low-odds one but not completely implausible – would see Russia's demands change. If Ukraine's battlefield success continues, Russia would have two options. One would be to escalate further, with more attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, additional mobilisations, more threats and (however unlikely) nuclear weapon use. The other would be to seek a ceasefire or peace talks. At least some interlocutors close to the Kremlin recognise that Russia's resources are increasingly exhausted; that coercion and threats are not working; and that Russian forces appear unlikely to regain the upper hand on the battlefield. "There is an understanding in the Kremlin that mobilisation will not enable a decisive victory over Ukraine", a Russian expert close to the Kremlin told Crisis Group.⁵⁰

If these views hold sway and the Kremlin leadership offers compromise of some sort (with details depending on battlefield dynamics), Western pressure on Ukraine to negotiate would rise. Ukraine's government would also likely be more amenable, although domestic political dynamics would continue to limit what it could negotiate about.

In the meantime, Western governments, while supporting Ukraine, can keep a door open to diplomacy aimed at ending the war, even if the moment now is not opportune. They should do all they can to help the Kremlin feel it can back away from the war without risking that its adversaries will try to foment its domestic collapse. They cannot, of course, guarantee Russia's stability – but they can try to make eventual deals with Ukraine more palatable, including, as Crisis Group has previously recommended, by dangling the prospect of easing the sanctions that have inflicted

⁴⁷ "Senior White House official involved in undisclosed talks with top Putin aides", *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 November 2022.

⁴⁸ "CIA Director Bill Burns met with Russian counterpart Monday", CNN, 14 November 2022.

⁴⁹ "U.S. privately asks Ukraine to show it's open to negotiate with Russia", *The Washington Post*, 5 November 2022.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Russian expert, 30 September 2022.

the most pain on ordinary Russians and reiterating that any peace deal would also require new security arrangements for the region as a whole, to reassure everyone, including Ukraine and Russia.⁵¹ To this end, recent statements by U.S. President Joe Biden, that he is prepared to speak with Putin if the latter sought to end the war, and French President Emmanuel Macron, that he would keep engaging with the Kremlin to mitigate war's effects, hit the right notes.⁵²

IV. Could a Ceasefire Be a Positive Step?

Calls for negotiations aimed at reaching agreement on a ceasefire abound in some corners of social media.⁵³ But as with a broader deal, both Russia and Ukraine insist that an end to fighting is possible only if and when the other accedes to its demands – ie, Ukraine withdraws from the territories Russia claims to have annexed (in Moscow's case) or Russia withdraws from Ukraine (in Kyiv's). Neither scenario is in the offing right now.

At some point, if Russia continues to lose ground, it may be more interested in a ceasefire based on the battle lines then in place, but even that would not necessarily make such a deal a precursor to peace. From Moscow's perspective, the point of a ceasefire would almost certainly be to buy time and space to rebuild its military capacity in preparation for new offensives and to pressure Ukraine for concessions in the meantime. While Ukraine would just as surely use the time the same way, it has little interest in quitting while it is ahead and giving Russia time to catch up. Furthermore, unless Russia is greatly weakened, it would likely demand ceasefire terms that include, at the least, recognition of its control of the territory it occupied at that time and limits on Ukrainian military activity and deployments. A Russian military expert told Crisis Group: "The Kremlin wants to retain at least some of the territories it has annexed, and any ceasefire that guarantees this is now in Russia's interest".⁵⁴ Accepting those terms would make no sense to Kyiv unless it, too, is facing real constraints on its fighting capacity.

Again, as with a broader deal, Moscow may be counting on Western pressure to shift dynamics. But here as well, Kyiv would resist any such pressure. Western states, too, view the idea of seeking a ceasefire now as tantamount to giving in to Russia's nuclear blackmail and setting the stage for more of the same – an assessment that seems valid based on Russia's behaviour to date.⁵⁵ At a later point, it is not unthinkable that a ceasefire could pave the way to a broader deal. For now, though, even if new stalemates in the fighting are possible, there is little reason for either side to want to

⁵¹ See Crisis Group, *EU Watch List 2022 – Autumn Update*, 10 October 2022.

⁵² Steve Holland, Michael Rose and Jeff Mason, "Biden, Macron vow unity on Ukraine and move to end subsidy tensions", Reuters, 2 December 2022.

⁵³ See, for example, tweet by Elon Musk, @elonmusk, 6:15pm, 3 October 2022; or the spat between Ukraine's then-ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk, and a group of German public figures who signed an open letter entitled "Ceasefire Now!" in the German weekly *Die Zeit* in June: "Go to hell": The ambassador of Ukraine in Germany Melnyk on a letter from 'German intellectuals' calling for an end to support for Ukraine", *Ukrainska Pravda*, 30 June 2022.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Russian military expert, 18 October 2022.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, autumn 2022.

formalise them. Even were Western capitals inclined to push Kyiv toward a ceasefire and Ukraine less impervious to pressure, it is hard to imagine much upside to any ceasefire that might result under present conditions – and easy to see the risks.

V. Could Changing Russia's Government Bring Peace?

While, in theory, a change in Kremlin leadership might create opportunities for conflict resolution, in practice the war is unlikely to end due to pressure from inside Russia. It would be dangerous to try forcing such a change from the outside.⁵⁶

A popular revolution is difficult to fathom. On an autocratic path even before its February offensive in Ukraine (Russia has not had free elections or competitive politics in over two decades), the Kremlin has cracked down even harder on dissent and the flow of information since 24 February, driving many opposition-minded citizens to flee the country.⁵⁷ Putin and his inner circle control the security services, the media, elections, the courts and the economy. State-approved propaganda rules the airwaves, with independent voices available only via a reliable virtual private network (VPN), access to which can be difficult. No surprise, then, that opinion polls throughout Russia indicate support for the war and for the government.⁵⁸ Although these polls are not reliable in a country where social media posts can draw prison time, they do offer evidence of unwillingness on Russian citizens' part to express opinions critical of the Kremlin's current direction.⁵⁹

More dissent could emerge, though the odds are against it. For example, more Russians could lose their inhibitions as frustration grows with war and economic hardship, but even then, the Russian state is set up to prevent real opposition from finding expression. As of now, dissenters face a choice between leaving the country and prison. There are two exceptions. One is the freer rein given to those who support the war, but want it carried out more forcefully and viciously, and to see the forces better prepared.⁶⁰ The second is the small wave of cross-national protests by mainly female relatives of the mobilised, complaining that their male kin are inadequately equipped and prepared. While they have faced roadblocks from officialdom, they

⁵⁶ Historically, new Russian (and before that Soviet) governments have sought to end wars and reach out to the West upon coming into power, starting, perhaps most notably, in the wake of the 1917 revolution, though the record is far from perfectly consistent. Even a hawkish and nationalistic new government would have to consolidate power within the Kremlin and ensure domestic stability, which could lead it to seek peace in Ukraine, although its intent might be to return to the battlefield eventually.

⁵⁷ See, for example, "Chronicles of Anti War Repression Eight Months of War", OVD-Info, October 2022.

⁵⁸ According to a Levada Center poll, in October 2022, 73 per cent of Russians supported the military operation in Ukraine, while 20 per cent did not. See "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022", Levada Center, 27 October 2022.

⁵⁹ See, for example, "The first criminal cases on 'military fakes' were opened in Russia", BBC Russian, 16 March 2022.

⁶⁰ "Barefoot with automatics to the front": How the bad luck of the armed forces provoked a campaign against their leadership", The Bell, 3 October 2022 (Russian); and "Alliance of Kadyrov and Prigozhin: How war's main proponents continue to criticise the military", BBC Russian, 29 October 2022.

have generally not been detained. Indeed, the Kremlin took this situation seriously enough to organise an audience with Putin for a group of wives and mothers. These, however, were a handpicked group of government workers and other loyalists. Those demanding an end to war and peace talks with Ukraine were not invited.⁶¹

Alternatively, it is possible that someone within the system would take over from Putin, perhaps even with his blessing were he, for example, to become ill – though nothing suggests any such person emerging any time soon. In this case, peace could plausibly follow, simply because any new leader might need to free up resources otherwise tied up in the war effort in order to consolidate support. Thus far, however, though views of the war within Putin's inner circle reportedly vary, its members seem to believe that they are better off supporting the current dispensation. "They [Putin's inner circle] may have different opinions on the war, but in the Russian political system it does not matter – they will all do what Putin decides to do and no one will argue with him", a political adviser of a Kremlin-connected Russian businessman told Crisis Group.⁶²

Nor is it clear exactly how Western states could act to effect a change of government, though all evidence suggests that even trying would carry tremendous danger. As noted above, a Western effort to overthrow the government is among the scenarios that Russia's political and military leadership fear the most. Support for any group seeking regime change in Russia would feed the Kremlin's sense that it is besieged by the West, increasing nuclear risks. If Russia is to change, it will in all likelihood have to change on its own from within – which, again, appears unlikely to happen for now.

While Western states and Ukraine may not be able to change Russia, they should stay true to their values and continue to engage with dissidents, championing their rights, and with exiles, offering safe haven to those who flee Putin's increasingly dictatorial rule. Indeed, more openness to Russians could, over time, generate more support for better relations with the West or, at least, undermine the Kremlin's arguments that the West is hostile to Russians.

VI. Conclusion

Given the costs and risks of continued conflict, it is no wonder that commentators and some policymakers in Western capitals (egged on, in some cases, by Moscow) have focused their critical gaze inward, wondering if the U.S. and its NATO allies are doing too much to sustain Ukraine's war effort and too little to encourage a peaceful settlement. Some critics go as far as to argue that the former are using the latter as pawns in a proxy war with Moscow, both prolonging the fighting and its horrible effects, and driving regional instability with potentially catastrophic repercussions.⁶³

⁶¹ See "Meeting with mothers of military personnel – participants in the special military operation, Kremlin", Kremlin, 25 November 2022; "It's already too late to be afraid': Relatives of the mobilised have turned to the Council of Mothers and Wives, demanding the return of their loved ones from the front and talks with Ukraine", Meduza, 17 November 2022 (Russian); and "Are you a man or what?' Council of Mothers and Wives of mobilised and draftees demand that Putin personally meet with them", Meduza, 22 November 2022 (Russian).

⁶² Crisis Group interview, 17 November 2022.

⁶³ See, for example, "John Mearsheimer: The West is playing Russian roulette", YouTube, 29 November 2022. In Germany, the narrative that Western weapons deliveries prolong the war in

But this characterisation fails on several levels – denying Ukrainian agency, misunderstanding the nature of the conflict and short-selling the gravity of the interests both Kyiv and its Western partners have in its outcome.

The war has from its inception in 2014 been a nested conflict. Russia's view of Ukraine as a natural vassal state and Ukraine's fight for independence coincide with Moscow's struggle against a West that it believes is out to weaken it or, at least, deprive it of the influence over former Soviet neighbour states that Russia has long felt is its due.⁶⁴ Vladimir Putin has said and written that he views Ukraine as an artificial construct, dependent on and aligned with Russia.⁶⁵ But even before Putin came to power, the Kremlin saw the post-Cold War European security order as unfair, chafing as NATO welcomed in eager former Warsaw Pact countries and the Baltics, and former Soviet states sought ties with the West. Under Putin, Russia has also increasingly framed the standoff in gendered terms and sought to demonise the West for progress on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.⁶⁶

Thus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is best seen as a two-pronged effort that seeks to bring Kyiv to heel at the same time that it aims to force Western states to renegotiate European security such that Moscow's sway over neighbouring countries is accepted. The ensuing standoff has made it even easier for Russia to isolate itself and make the case that it is protecting its people from the Western influence that, in its telling, is roiling and tearing apart Ukraine. As Moscow indicated in the proposed agreements it delivered to Brussels and Washington amid the failed flurry of late 2021 diplomacy, it wants a much weakened NATO that promises no further enlargement.⁶⁷ As it indicated in its demands that Ukraine be "denazified" and "demilitarised" at the start of its invasion, it also wants full sway over its neighbour, including, it seems, in the cultural and social realms.⁶⁸ Thus far, despite its troubles on the battlefield, it has not walked back any of those demands.

Such positions are unacceptable to both Ukraine and its Western partners. Russia's position on Ukraine poses an existential threat to that country's sovereignty but also menaces other European states. While they may discount Russia's socio-cultural posturing, NATO members see Russia's efforts to limit the alliance's capabilities as intended to constrain their capacity to defend themselves and their allies.⁶⁹ In addition, they fear what Russia's use of force to change borders and reliance on nuclear

Ukraine was a fixation of mainstream talk shows throughout the summer. See, for example, "Ihr Weg landet im Krieg mit Russland!": Heftiger Streit um Waffenlieferungen bei 'Maischberger'", Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 15 June 2022.

⁶⁴ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Responding to Russia's New Military Buildup Near Ukraine*, op. cit., Section III; and Crisis Group Europe Report N°256, *Peace in Ukraine I: A European War*, 27 April 2020.

⁶⁵ "Putin: Ukraine under the Bolsheviks was developed as an artificial state", TASS, 27 October 2022.

⁶⁶ See Elizaveta Gaufman, "Damsels in Distress: Fragile Masculinity in Digital War", *Media, War and Conflict*, 18 October 2022.

⁶⁷ See "Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees" and "Agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization", both op. cit.

⁶⁸ See "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", Kremlin, 24 February 2022; and "Putin calls residents of Russia's new regions 'our people'", TASS, 1 December 2022.

⁶⁹ See, for instance, Giuseppe Famà and Lisa Musiol, "The War in Ukraine Raises New Questions for EU Foreign Policy", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 April 2022.

menacing as a tool of statecraft have engendered. For now, Western capitals are, for the most part, set on backing Ukraine in the hope of a victory that will deter if not prevent Russia from carrying out aggression of this sort again – even if that means running a low but not zero risk that a desperate Russia does the unthinkable by becoming the first power to use nuclear weapons since World War II.

In reality, however, neither side is likely to achieve its maximal goals, leaving much to be sorted out in post-war arrangements. Ideally, those would begin to construct an emergent European security architecture even as they cement the Ukrainian future that will also be shaped by these battlefield dynamics. While it would be premature to specify the desired content of those arrangements, it is not too early to observe that if more and more dangerous wars are to be averted, Russia and NATO must be able to coexist.

One way to facilitate such coexistence, making further Russian aggression less likely, NATO less threatening to Russia and all the countries of Europe, including Ukraine, more secure, might be through arms control arrangements and other mutual commitments to help quiet the greatest anxieties on all sides. If Russia made sufficient moves of its own – for example, agreeing to significant limits on deployments and exercises in the Black and Baltic sea regions – NATO might see the logic of reciprocating with limitations on military exercises and activities in the same areas. For Europe as a whole, limits on specific weapons such as short- and medium-range missiles could be negotiable. For these arrangements to return a measure of stability to a part of the world that has increasingly become a tinderbox, they must also incorporate the needs of countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Georgia, including credible guarantees of their security. In order to hold, they also cannot ignore Russia's own fears, however disingenuous others may find them.

In the meantime, however, the best option for Ukraine's outside partners is to continue along the path they are on, with all its risks, costs and uncertainties. They should maintain the support Kyiv needs, while doing whatever they can to avoid getting sucked into a direct confrontation that would run a high risk of turning nuclear. Diplomacy aimed at mitigating the war's repercussions and deterring the use of nuclear weapons should continue. Pressing for a ceasefire, for now, makes less sense. While battlefield dynamics will determine when the two sides decide to return to the table, Western governments should keep the option open, in particular by making clear to the Kremlin that their goal is not a change of government in Moscow and that dividends in terms of sanctions relief would follow a settlement acceptable to Ukraine. Nor is it too early to start thinking through the contours of a European security architecture that would mean security for Russians, too. For now, though, those thoughts remain aspirational, as Russia's February invasion approaches its first anniversary, with no end in sight.

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