

Regardless of How the War Ends, How Can Ukraine's Long-Term Security Be Realistically Guaranteed?

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Ukraine's long-term security rests on three pillars: Russia's full military defeat in the war, the Western realization there can be no return to cooperation or interdependence with autocratic and imperialist Russia, and Ukrainian integration into the EU and then into NATO. Remove any one of these, and the probability of another Russian invasion of Ukraine sharply increases.

Russia's Military Defeat is Essential

Russia [claims](#) that its invasion of Ukraine is an act of self-defense aimed at preventing Ukraine from becoming a staging ground for NATO's planned attack on Russia or attacking Russia itself to do the bidding of its US and NATO masters. But President Vladimir Putin's real goals in Ukraine are an imperialist land grab, destruction of the sovereign Ukrainian state, and elimination or subjugation of all Ukrainians who do not share Putin's view of the illegitimacy of distinct Ukrainian identity and of a Ukrainian nation separate from Russia. Putin's imperialistic [vision](#) was long evident in his pre-invasion speeches and statements but was discounted as little more than provocative but not practically consequential rhetoric. Instead, Russia's legitimate security concerns over NATO enlargement were [supposedly](#) behind escalating tensions, even though Ukraine's membership in NATO was [never](#) a realistic possibility.

As soon as the invasion began, the imperial intent of the war became increasingly harder to deny. In the tightly controlled Russian state media, the "solution to the Ukrainian question" was (prematurely) [announced](#), and [Putin](#) and Russia's other top officials, such as Sergey [Naryshkin](#) and Nikolai [Patrushev](#), denied Ukraine's nationhood and sovereignty. An [article](#) titled "What Should Russia Do With Ukraine," published in the state-owned media outlet RIA-Novosti, outlined a chilling plan to destroy Ukrainians and Ukraine itself. In occupied Ukrainian towns and villages, Russian forces have been methodically [going](#)

[after](#) pro-Ukrainian activists, including teachers of Ukrainian language and history (subjects that the occupying “authorities” are also planning to [remove](#) from school curriculums). They are set to destroy symbols of Ukraine’s distinctiveness, such as “[wrong](#)” history books in libraries, [monuments](#), and even Ukrainian language [signs](#) in classrooms. With those detained, tortured, and murdered under the occupation accused of being “Nazis,” and mounting [evidence](#) of systematic murder, forced [deportations](#) to Russia, and [plans](#) for “re-education” and Russification of deported Ukrainian children led some scholars of genocide to [conclude](#) that Russia’s actions in Ukraine show the intent to destroy the Ukrainian nation, thus fitting the international legal definition of genocide.

As abhorrent and irrational as Putin’s worldview regarding Ukraine may seem, this is the reality within which the war is fought. As long as Russia remains undefeated militarily and continues to pursue its objectives in Ukraine, this will mean the destruction of Ukrainian identity and a system of terror against the Ukrainian people on whatever territory Russia manages to control, with a permanent threat of further aggression and piece-meal annexation. Therefore, security for Ukraine can be achieved only if Putin is clearly denied his goals in Ukraine—now and going forward. The West should not contemplate a middle-of-the-road settlement or an off-ramp at the expense of Ukraine’s territorial losses. Territorial concessions will condemn numerous Ukrainians to the brutal and genocidal occupation regime, drive others from their homes, show Putin that he can partially achieve and “get away” with his imperialist goals, and only embolden further territorial grabs in the future.

Ukraine is not asking Western democracies to fight for it but is asking for heavy weapons to enable its army to liberate territories seized by Russia. Some in the West [fear](#) that supplying offensive weapons to Ukraine could put the West in direct confrontation with Russia, leading to a nuclear war. We should not assume that Russia will escalate to a nuclear confrontation if it is denied its goals in Ukraine. Nuclear deterrence works both ways. Russia knows that a nuclear confrontation with NATO would bring the war to Russia’s territory. Putin is unlikely to go that far as this move would be riskier for the survival of his regime than fighting a conventional war outside its borders. In addition, Russia has already shown that it recognizes military failures and adjusts its behavior when it is effectively challenged. The failed attempt to capture Kyiv quickly led to a scaled-down goal of “liberating” Donbas (and possibly achieving a land bridge to Crimea). This does not mean that the broader vision vis-a-vis Ukraine changed, but Russia’s adaptation, when faced with effective resistance rather than appeasement, gives a good indication that Putin will not risk a suicidal move such as a nuclear strike against the West.

In the short term, security for Ukraine means Russian defeat on the battlefield by making war so costly that Russia is forced to withdraw from the territories it invaded since

February. This can be achieved through a combination of additional and more lethal military aid to Ukraine and more comprehensive sanctions on Russia. While affirming its sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders, it may be wise for Ukraine to stop short of attempting to reclaim Crimea militarily, even though, as **Petro Burkovskyi** and **Olexiy Haran** note, not pursuing liberation of all internationally recognized Ukrainian territory could be a hard sell domestically in Ukraine and would also delay the punishment of Russian war criminals. If anything has the potential to trigger nuclear escalation, a military attack on Crimea is the most likely scenario because of the strategic importance of the Black Sea Fleet to Russia.

President Volodymyr Zelensky [signaled](#) that Ukraine will not use military force to return Crimea, and to negotiate over the status of Donbas, given the region's "complexities." Repelling Russian forces from all of the Donbas would be harder to achieve militarily than pushing them out from the newly occupied territories. After eight years of Russian control, reincorporating the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" would present unique challenges given in and out-migration influenced by political preferences, [passportization](#), and systematic targeting of pro-Ukrainian residents—all [resulted](#) in a less pro-Ukrainian population. The status of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" (DPR and LPR) as they existed before the February 2022 invasion could thus be resolved by non-military means at a future date.

What these solutions would look like would depend on what happens in Russia domestically. If Putin holds on to power, the pre-February status quo may persist—with Russia de-facto controlling Crimea and DPR and LPR but Ukraine and the rest of the world not recognizing the legality of the annexation and independence. A post-Putin Russia may be open to other possibilities. But until that happens, Ukraine should not be denied EU and NATO entry because it does not control these territories. NATO should acknowledge that these territories are not disputed but occupied. Russia has no legitimate claim to them but took control over them in the 2014 aggression.

The West Should Not Return to Pre-War Cooperation with Russia

Former German Chancellor Schroder [recently argued](#) that Russia is too important to be isolated politically or economically in the long run. Many in the West [agree](#) with him, even if they are not as vocal about it for now as Ukraine fights for its independence. However, Ukraine's (and Europe's) long-term security requires the rejection of this notion and the realization that as long as Russia remains governed by an autocrat and wedded to an imperialist reading of its history, it will remain a threat to its neighbors and stability in Europe. A new Iron Curtain needs to descend to guard against this Russia. Russia should

be isolated and contained for as long as it takes for Russian society to bring about regime change and democratization.

Moscow Incessantly Rebuffed the West

For the last 22 years, the West has pursued cooperation and economic interdependence with increasingly autocratic Russia. As Putin turned to domestic repression in the 2000s to consolidate his grip on power, starting with the Khodorkovsky trial, followed by Anna Politkovskaya's murder, Litvinenko's poisoning, and Magnitsky's death in custody, Western leaders lectured about democracy and human rights, but cooperation with Russia continued on the international level as the US spearheaded a confrontation with the Axis of Evil. The West also welcomed Russian oligarchs and their businesses. After Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and the recognition of Georgian territory as independent Russia-backed statelets, the West did not respond firmly but instead walked back on plans to welcome Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. Moreover, during Dmitry Medvedev's term in the presidency, the US attempted a re-set of cooperation with Russia, which included accelerating Russia's accession to the WTO and cooperation on the management of the global financial crisis. In 2011-2012, Germany pursued Nord Stream 1, which increased Europe's energy dependence on Russia, just as the Russian regime stepped up repression against domestic opposition through the Bolotnaya prosecutions of protestors, the Pussy Riot case, and anti-LGBTQ legislation and foreign agents' legislation.

After the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the US and Europe imposed some sanctions on Russia but continued to hope to engage in constructive cooperation and did not reverse economic interdependence policies. France and Germany entered the Normandy format with Russia, accepting the false premise that Russia was simply a mediator between the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian separatists in Donbas when, in fact, Russia had been the [instigator](#) of the Donbas insurgency. The initial sanctions package was gradually watered down, and Germany proceeded with Nord Stream 2, which would only enhance European dependence on Russian gas. Through the years, European governments largely turned a blind eye to [Russia's interference](#) in their domestic democratic process and to highly probable attempted and successful assassinations of opponents of the Putin regime (Chechen defectors, former spies, opposition oligarchs, and arms dealers) in European cities. The policy of cooperation and interdependence, despite escalating Russian domestic repression and international aggression, failed to nudge Russia to respect international norms and commit to stability in Europe. On the contrary, it gave Putin a sense of impunity and set the stage for the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

If Ukraine's security is going to be guaranteed in the long run, European and NATO allies have to change course and pursue a policy of containment of autocratic Russia, which would weaken it militarily and diplomatically. US Secretary of Defense Austin [stated](#) this goal as a way of ending the war on Ukraine, and the policy needs to persist even after hostilities are over. The following measures are recommended.

- The sanctions package should remain in place until Russia withdraws from all Ukrainian territory, even if the extent of sanctions could vary to reflect the extent of a Russian withdrawal.
- The international community should work with Ukraine to investigate and document Russian [war crimes](#) and genocidal actions and bring the perpetrators to justice in an international tribunal.
- Europe should wean itself off of Russian oil and gas and pursue alternative energy sources.
- Western democracies should adopt stricter policies aimed at preventing Russian interference in their domestic politics.
- Party financing rules should preclude Russian funds from going to local political actors.
- Media regulators and domestic security agencies should enforce closer monitoring to prevent the spread of Russian disinformation narratives in Western media.
- International organizations where Russia occupies positions of power should consider ways of limiting its role and impact on policies.
- Russian citizens who want to defect from autocratic Russia should be welcome as they were during the Cold War, but steps should be taken to prevent wealthy Russians from maintaining parallel lives in Russia and in the West.
- Diplomatic efforts should focus exclusively on preventing nuclear escalation rather than on re-engaging Russia.

The goal of Russia's containment is not a revenge for its 2022 aggression. Without sustained containment, Russia would again perceive the West as weak, which could fuel not only another attempted invasion further into Ukraine but also aggressive moves against other states near Russia's borders and Western-style democracies anywhere.

Ukraine Should be Integrated into the EU and NATO

Meanwhile, as the West works to contain Russia, Ukraine should be gradually integrated into the EU and NATO. Short-term security might be achieved through a roadmap to EU accession. Ukraine's integration into the EU can proceed at a pace that accommodates the massive reconstruction that has to take place and the continuation of domestic reforms essential to successful EU integration. Our assessment of Ukraine's reforms since

2014 is somewhat more positive than **Paul D'Anieri's**, who states that Ukraine achieved only as much as needed to keep the aid coming. While more reforms are needed, Ukraine significantly curtailed corruption and improved the rule of law since 2014 thanks to an active civil society, which worked well with the international community to both push and pull the government to implement reforms. After the war, we expect that political will in the government will increase as well. Ukraine has a functioning democracy, which withstood hostile attacks by Russia through disinformation and direct political interference for eight years. Ukraine managed to maintain competitive media space and freedom of speech while working to reduce the pernicious effects of Russian propaganda. It safeguarded the political rights of pro-Russian citizens and parties and allowed them full access to the electoral process, even as, we now find out, some of them were working directly with Russia to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. Ukraine has demonstrated strong state capacity during the war, resilient and trusted local government institutions and a vibrant civil society that works effectively with the state. All this bodes well for post-war democratic governance. Being formally on the path to EU membership as an EU candidate state will further safeguard against any democratic backsliding. Ukraine's European integration will show that Ukraine has earned its place among Western democracies, which will reduce the possibility of renewed Russian aggression.

Long-term security for Ukraine can only be achieved through NATO membership, not through alternatives to NATO membership. If Ukraine is not in NATO, NATO will not give Article-5 like guarantees to Ukraine. Security guarantees that, in practice, do not offer collective defense in case of future aggression would be insufficient as they would leave Ukraine vulnerable if Russia were to attack again. **D'Anieri** argues that a credible commitment by the West to resupply Ukraine with weapons in case of another Russian attack may be enough to guarantee Ukrainian security long-term. **Mariya Omelicheva** proposes that Ukraine build up its defense capabilities through military reforms and Western help, which would deter Russia from another attack. **Haran** and **Burkovskiy** suggest that a NATO-enforced no-fly zone could be negotiated. We agree that all these strategies would help increase Ukraine's security, but ultimately we think they are halfway measures that are high-risk for Ukraine and insufficient to guarantee Ukraine's security over the long term.

Russia's February 2022 invasion involved a major Russian miscalculation both of Ukraine's military capabilities and of western support for Ukraine. The success of the above-mentioned measures relies heavily on Russia's ability to update and learn from this war. But we think that the risk that Russia would misread the West's commitment or Ukraine's readiness again is significant. Without a major game-changer like NATO membership, Russia may again think that it is ready to crush Ukraine's resistance and push the West towards compromise in a few years. Furthermore, Russia has [demanded](#) that Ukrainian

military forces are curtailed in size and prevented from training with foreign partners without Russia's consent—something that would put Ukraine in an even weaker position than it is now.

Will Ukraine in NATO anger Russia? There is no doubt it would, but that is not a good reason to refrain from moving in this direction. Finland and Sweden's NATO applications are also angering Russia, but few are prepared to back away from them because these countries have the sovereign right to decide their security alliances and also will make a solid contribution to NATO's collective defense capability. Both of these reasons apply to Ukraine. As the West is coming to the realization that autocratic Russia ruled by Putin is a threat to its neighbors and to peace and stability in Europe, it is evident that NATO enlargement was what guaranteed security for states in Russia's claimed "sphere of influence" and fulfilled the alliance's defensive mission. While Putin's propaganda machine will dispute it, extending the NATO umbrella to Ukraine does not threaten Russia's legitimate interests such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, or ability to pursue independent policies. Just like it has been for Poland, the Baltic states, and other former Soviet bloc countries, NATO membership for Ukraine is an insurance against the threat of Russia's imperialism, not an encroachment on Russia's security. Paradoxically, as **D'Anieri** points out, Ukraine in NATO could actually be less threatening to Russia than Ukraine outside of NATO because NATO would have a powerful incentive to ensure that Ukraine follows all elements of a peace treaty. In this regard, if the war ends with a peace treaty whereby Ukraine commits not to retake Crimea by force, NATO states which have been determined to avoid direct military conflict with Russia would ensure that NATO member Ukraine abides by the treaty's terms.

To demonstrate NATO's defensive objectives, NATO membership for Ukraine can be combined with good-faith assurances to Russia that Ukraine will not be used as a launching pad for military aggression against Russia. NATO can pledge not to place certain types of weapons on Ukrainian territory, limit the size of its troops in Ukraine, and institutionalize transparency about training exercises. Further measures could be determined by military experts through consultations.

Putin's naked aggression against Ukraine served as a wake-up call for those who believed that engaging with an increasingly authoritarian and revisionist regime is the way to moderate Russia's behavior towards its neighbors and maintain peace in Europe. The West must break free from Russian gaslighting and come together to defend itself, and Ukraine and the democratic/liberal principles both stand for and not cow to the bully.