Vladimir Putin Doesn't Want Your Off-Ramp

On the dangers of misreading the Russian president once again.

Susan Glasser

Nuclear blackmail, illegal annexation of territory, hundreds of thousands of Russian men rounded up and sent to the front lines in Ukraine, a European gas pipeline from Russia mysteriously blowing up. This is what Vladimir Putin backed into a corner looks like.

Since Putin launched a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, President Joe Biden has held to a steadfast line when it comes to the war: his goal is to help Ukraine win while also ensuring that victory does not come at the cost of triggering World War III. But Washington is hardly clear on how exactly it will be possible to continue pursuing both goals simultaneously, given that Putin is holding Ukraine, and by extension the rest of the world, hostage to his demands.

After a successful, U.S.-bolstered counteroffensive in September, Putin responded by mobilizing several hundred thousand civilians and holding what the Biden administration sternly termed "sham 'referenda'"[1] as a pretext to claim Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine as part of the Russian state. After Ukraine successfully struck the Kerch bridge, the lifeline to Russian-occupied Crimea, Putin escalated attacks on civilian infrastructure across Ukraine and sent swarms of Iranian-manufactured drones to attack cities far from the front lines. Throughout all this, he continued to deploy the reckless language of nuclear saber-rattling.

What does Putin want? In the West, there has been much talk since the very beginning of the war of "off ramps" and how and when to prod Ukraine to the negotiating table with Russia. More recently, as Putin has suffered reverses on the battlefield—losing by late fall as much as fifty percent of the Ukrainian territory Russia had gained control of earlier in the war—many supporters of Ukraine in the West have argued to increase the pace, scope, and scale of assistance to Ukraine in hopes of achieving an outright military victory or something close to it that would secure Ukraine's future as a viable independent state. Many smart Kremlin watchers believe Putin, having failed to accomplish his goals militarily, is trying to set the terms for diplomacy with his escalations. Then again, it's hard to imagine that Biden, or Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, or anyone else who believes in international order for that matter, could agree to that right now.

Still, Donald Trump and a growing faction of pro-Putin cheerleaders in the conservative media such as the Fox News host Tucker Carlson demand still more concessions to Russia in response to Putin's escalating threats. The ex-president, who did so much to weaken NATO and undermine allies while praising Putin when in office, even offered up himself as a mediator, and the House Republican Leader, Kevin McCarthy, has said that a GOP majority in that chamber would no longer continue to offer Ukraine a "blank check" of billions more in military assistance. Trump is once again a candidate for president, which will serve to amplify his views on the Ukraine war—and it's important to remember that Trump for years has said he did not consider Crimea a legitimate part of Ukraine (he even, according to former ambassador Marie Yovanovitch's memoir, told this to the former president of Ukraine in a 2017 Oval Office meeting), publicly opposed the $40 billion Ukraine aid package passed by a strong bipartisan majority in Congress this spring, and praised Putin's strategic "genius" after the invasion in February. Biden, meanwhile, cannot take the backing of his own party as an unquestioned guarantee going forward, a point reinforced recently when thirty Democrats in the Congressional Progressive Caucus sent him a letter that appeared to undercut the administration's policy by urging that he open immediate negotiations with Putin to end the war. Amid Putin's nuclear bluster, it was a strikingly off-message line, and the representatives quickly withdrew the letter, though it was soon followed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Mark Milley, making similar arguments, in public and private, about the need for negotiations this winter. The point has been made: America's internal divisions over the war exist, and Putin will do everything possible to further exacerbate them.

It seems clear that negotiating now with Putin would be an extraordinary concession in and of itself to Putin's barbarism and willingness to push the world to the brink of nuclear conflict. Yet it's also clear that it's not just

Trumpists who are advocating a negotiated peace with more urgency since Putin, in early September, vowed to "make use of all weapons systems available to us" and warned of his nuclear-tinged rhetoric, "This is not a bluff."

Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan has promised a "catastrophic" response if Putin were to deploy battlefield nukes in the Ukraine conflict and Biden himself has openly (and, to the minds of many other officials, unhelpfully) fretted about the prospect of "Armageddon" that Putin's rhetoric raises. American military officials have no doubt produced many serious options for the United States to consider in such a case, including, I'm reliably told, directly entering the war on Ukraine's side—which is close to the World War III scenario Biden has been so determined to avoid.

In fact, Fiona Hill, the Russia expert who served as a national intelligence officer covering Russia during the latter part of the George W. Bush administration and later as the National Security Council senior director for the region during the Trump presidency, told me recently she believes there's an element of self-delusion to much of the current commentary about the possibility of Washington and the rest of the West continuing to back Ukraine in the war while somehow still avoiding conflict with Putin. After all, Putin launched his war against Ukraine not in February, but eight years earlier, when Russia invaded the country and illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula. As far as Hill is concerned, we are *already* fighting in World War III, whether we acknowledge it or not. "We've been in this for a long time and we've failed to recognize it," she said. (Her definition of such a world war does not automatically envision a nuclear exchange, I should note, given the attention it's gotten, but a wide conflict between two superpowers even if it largely takes place outside the boundaries of either—most of World War I, as she pointed out, was not on German territory.)

Her chilling thought raises a searing question about U.S. policy: If the goal is to avoid a conflict that we are in fact already fighting, then does the rest of the policy need to be reconsidered as well?

Watching all this, it's hard not to think of how often over the last two decades the West has collectively failed to get Putin right—or to get him at all, for that matter. Over the summer, I was asked by the Aspen Strategy Group (ASG) to make a presentation on Russia at war, and what stood out was the number of times, and variety of ways, in which the U.S. and its allies missed the mark in understanding Putin at critical junctures in his long and unlikely tenure as Russia's modern tsar. Looking back, I would argue that American foreign policy has consistently underestimated Putin and overestimated our role, across administrations and parties, in being able to influence him, leading to misjudgments both about his goals/motivations and the tactics he would be willing to use. Why would this time be any different?

Two decades ago, the initial misassessment of Putin as a Westernizing reformer with whom the United States could do business foreshadowed many other consequential misjudgments about how, when, and where Putin would act, and what levers of power could be used to sway his actions. In reality, the former KGB lieutenant colonel turned out to be an autocratic modernizer who yearned not just for the police-state powers of the Soviet Union but also for the nationalistic glory and lost empire of the Russia that preceded it. The spy who hung a portrait of Peter the Great in his modest St. Petersburg office decades ago has long invoked the trappings of the pre-Soviet imperial past. Brutality was always a virtue not a problem as he sees it. He was then and is now a conspiracy theorist, too, one who has not hesitated to do or say whatever was necessary and expedient at the time—including lying straight up to Western officials, in public and in private. He turned out to be not a pawn of oligarchs but an owner of them. And it ended up that while he has not recreated the Soviet Union—one of the great red herrings of the early debates about Putin—he has presided over a repressive, undemocratic regime that is catastrophically bad, for Russia and the world, in its own right.

I recognize that when we moved to Russia in late 2000, many of these were still open questions as everyone struggled to figure out the largely unknown new president of Russia, but after two decades these are settled facts. And it's worth noting that the vast majority of the Russians who helped us to understand the politics of Putin at that time are today either dead, in exile, or coopted into agents of the state.

In terms of relevance to what is happening with Ukraine today, one pattern leaps out, which is that again and again during his time in power, Putin has profited from the application of military force to achieve otherwise unattainable political ends. War, as Putin sees it, has been good to him. He came to power in late 1999 by promoting war in the separatist Russian province of Chechnya. He later sent Russian troops to Georgia and Syria and, in 2014, to Ukraine. Each time, there were endless rounds of speculation in Western capitals about the "exit ramp" that would finally entice Putin to end his latest incursion. Putin just kept barreling down the highway. Indeed, after each round of military aggression, a familiar pattern repeated itself in the West as well, in which, after an initial period of censure and, in more recent years, sanctions, a new American administration would come in and propose something of a

"reset" (whether called that or not). Trump after Crimea and all the rest envisioned a grand Russia-U.S. partnership. Even Biden came to office looking to put Russia "in a box," as a senior official once put it to me, and met with him in an early summit in Geneva in the spring of 2021 with that as a goal.

So yes, I'm skeptical when I hear the latest round of "exit ramp" angst. If there's one thing I've learned from watching Putin all this time, it's that he is not one to walk away from a fight or back down while losing—escalation is his game, and by now he is very, very practiced at it. As the *Moscow Times* put it[2] in a fascinating reported piece recently from inside the Kremlin elite, "Putin always chooses escalation." There is no example across time of Putin negotiating an end to any of these conflicts—meaning that there is potentially a crucial flaw if U.S. strategy is, as we heard at the ASG meeting this summer, premised on the idea that this only ends with a negotiated settlement.

Putin has never taken an off-ramp to do more than use a temporary cease-fire for advantage; he will not start now. Look at what has happened in Putin's wars. It seems notable that Putin still has troops in Georgia today and has never come to terms with the Georgian government. In Syria, Russia not only never left, but has in fact seen its support help Syrian leader Bashar Assad outlast successive U.S. administrations that backed his ouster. Putin's first war, in Chechnya, was won after a brutal campaign that lasted until he eventually installed a corrupt loyalist to lead the republic, the warlord Ramzan Kadyrov who has now become one of the most brutal commanders in the current conflict. As for Ukraine, Putin in 2014 took Crimea and never stopped fighting in eastern Ukraine even when he didn't win. The failure to capture more territory in eastern Ukraine back then did not deter Putin from his expansionist aims; he waited years and then renewed the fight with all the disastrous consequences we are now witnessing.

There is also the matter of Putin getting the West wrong. We in Washington hardly have a monopoly on misguided assumptions as a driving factor in international affairs. Many indicators suggest, in fact, that is a major reason why this war is happening in the first place—Putin not only failed to understand that Ukrainians would stand and fight against his aggression, but that the U.S. and its NATO allies would remain united and fund the Ukrainian resistance with billions of dollars' worth of military assistance. In that sense, the Russian president's decision to launch the invasion in February can and should be read as a massive failure of deterrence on the part of the West that flowed from Putin's flawed interpretation of the warnings he was loudly given before the war. Putin's escalations this fall, with more bogus annexations of territory and outrageous attacks on civilian Ukrainian targets, seem like further evidence that Putin does not really understand his adversaries, in that he has quite likely only hardened Ukrainian opposition to negotiations and prolonged the war with his most recent actions. "The problem is of course us misreading him, but also him misreading us," as Hill observed.

Nuclear brinkmanship with Ukraine caught in the middle between a wounded, sulking Russian dictator and an increasingly alarmed NATO alliance is just about a worst-case scenario for a world that hardly needs another crisis. And yet I'm left wondering: Will we ever take Putin both seriously and literally? In 2005, he called the breakup of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." In 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, he made clear that Russia was no longer a partner with the West, prefiguring his willingness to use force outside Russia's borders, as he did the next year in Georgia. In 2019, he told the editor of the *Financial Times* that the Western liberal order had failed and that he would lead the opposition to it. And what is Putin saying right now? That Ukraine is not a real country and that he is prepared to fight for decades to return it to its rightful place as part of Russia. It's time to listen.

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[1] Secretary Antony Blinken, Twitter post, September 29, 2022, 3:00 p.m., https://twitter.com/secblinken/status/1575561046495940609?s=46&t=XSrk1gXj1vsUywDn95M-DA.

[2] Farida Rustamova and Maxim Tovkaylo, "Putin Always Chooses Escalation," *The Moscow Times,* November 1, 2022, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/29/putin-always-chooses-escalation-a78923.