

Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business

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INTRODUCTION

Will 2021 be remembered as the year when President Vladimir Putin gave up on talking to Ukraine's leadership and made his decisive move to return it by force to Russia's orbit? He triggered a [serious war scare](#) in March and April of this year, but for some unknown reason decided not to move ahead with re-invading a vulnerable, much smaller neighbor. Now, Putin is once again [moving](#) troops near the border with Ukraine. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has [suggested](#) that Russia may be laying a trap for Ukraine that intentionally provokes Russia into invading. Seasoned [observers](#) of the Russian military are warning that the possibility of war may be higher now than in the spring.

Putin has also stepped up his rhetoric about Ukraine in multiple public appearances during 2021. He has hinted broadly that his patience with Kyiv is running out. A careful review of the Russian leader's record with respect to Ukraine suggests that almost all of the requisite components and justifications for military intervention are either in—or moving into—place. Both the near- and long-term indicators suggest that [Kyiv and Washington](#) have good reasons to worry.

2021: A PRETTY GOOD YEAR FOR PUTIN

Notwithstanding the conventional wisdom about the effects of the pandemic and domestic political turbulence, 2021 has actually been a pretty good year for Vladimir Putin. It began on a worrisome note though: the incoming U.S. administration was widely seen in Moscow as no friend of Russia generally or Putin personally. U.S. President Joe Biden is a committed trans-Atlanticist and a strong supporter of Ukraine. When Biden came into office, the extension of New START was the only positive, albeit completely predictable, development on the bilateral U.S.-Russia agenda. [Biden's campaign rhetoric](#) about making Russia pay a price for misdeeds—like its interference in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, the attempted assassination of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, and the SolarWinds cyber intrusion—fostered expectations of worsening U.S.-Russian relations even as officials in Washington emphasized the overriding importance of dealing with China.

Not so fast, Putin decided. He ordered a major deployment of troops to the border with Ukraine in a pointed and deliberate signal to two audiences—in Kyiv and in Washington.

For Kyiv, the message was simple: I can crush you. Neither the United States nor Europe can do anything about it.

For Washington, the message was more complex: pay close attention to Russia as a major power that cannot be marginalized on the U.S. agenda and that retains the ability to make trouble in sensitive places where it has the upper hand. Putin got what he evidently wanted—a one-on-one meeting with Biden in Geneva, explicit recognition of Russia's status as a "[worthy adversary](#)," and the resumption of dialogue with the United States on issues like cyber and strategic stability, ending a long interruption after the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.

The Biden administration's decision to [waive](#) sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany was announced in May. It was welcome news for the Kremlin yet stoked frustration in Kyiv, Central Europe, and some U.S. political circles while exacerbating divisions inside NATO and the EU.

Meanwhile, on the Russian domestic front, the September parliamentary elections, whose outcome was never in doubt, proved a resounding success. Despite worsening socioeconomic conditions, the Russian public remains [overwhelmingly passive and disengaged from politics](#). The increasingly repressive Kremlin is taking no chances, however. It easily [crushed the remnants](#) of Navalny's political organization and installed the ruling pro-Kremlin party with a symbolically important two-thirds constitutional majority in the Duma. The Kremlin also won another important [victory](#) by forcing Google and Apple to play by its rules and accelerated efforts to snuff out free speech and open access to the internet inside Russia. The Nobel Peace Prize went to a Russian newspaper rather than the jailed Navalny, sparing the Kremlin any international embarrassment.

A much-anticipated U.S.-EU effort to combat climate change and promote a global energy transition also ran into serious headwinds. The European energy crisis and soaring natural gas prices reminded Western policymakers that the hostile relationship with Russia can manifest itself in unexpected forms of payback that are directly threatening to the fragile global economy and their own domestic political standing. The Kremlin's finances got an unexpected boost as oil prices topped \$80 a barrel for the first time since 2018. Thanks to Putin's tight fiscal policy, the Russian state budget's [break-even price](#) is around \$40 a barrel. When prices climb above that level, the upside flows into the Kremlin's massive [hard currency reserves](#) (which presently total more than \$620 billion) or its rainy day funds. The windfall allows the government to pay for a range of military modernization programs and corporate and social welfare programs without breaking a sweat. All of that feel-good news blocks out less happy developments for the Kremlin like the ravages of the pandemic.

The divisions in U.S. domestic politics [appear](#) to the Kremlin as signs of weakness. They reinforce perceptions in Kremlin circles that the United States is now in inexorable decline, a narrative that is embraced and propagated by Russian officials, media, and analysts.

This string of successes has, no doubt, added to the Kremlin's and Putin's personal sense of self-confidence. Russia's house is in order, especially when compared to what is happening elsewhere in the world. Europe, instead of expunging hydrocarbons from its energy balance in pursuit of a green future, is begging for more Russian oil and gas. The United States worries about how the energy crisis contributes to rising inflation and realizes that it must treat Russia as a peer competitor. Chinese President Xi Jinping is a reliable friend for Putin and his inner circle, even though the growing asymmetries in that relationship are lost on no one.

A LONG RECORD OF SUCCESS

For a Kremlin elite that does not lack for modesty or the trappings of the good life, Putin's long string of wins for more than two decades feeds a sense of historical mission and personal redemption. Indeed, when Putin took over the reins from Boris Yeltsin at the end of 1999, Russia was, in the view of many observers, "on its knees."

In his two decades at the helm, the Russian leader has engineered a remarkable reversal. He has brought order to once-fractional domestic politics. He has put the Russian government's finances on a sound footing while avoiding reforms that might stimulate much-needed economic growth—but create sources of unpredictability. Instead, the order of the day for the Putin system is self-protection, which means minimizing the potential impact of future economic turbulence and tougher Western sanctions. He has rebuilt the Russian military into a [potent force](#) capable of dominating the country's immediate periphery while investing in next-generation weaponry that stirs concern in Washington, holds at risk all of Europe, and is capable of mounting limited expeditionary missions overseas in places like Syria. He has decisively halted NATO's expansion into the former Soviet lands. He has forged a strategic partnership with China that amplifies Russia's clout on the world stage and enhances that country's military capabilities against their common adversary—the United States. He has resumed Russia's role as an important player in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean while staking out ambitious geopolitical claims in many far-flung regions of the world.

Moreover, with the illegal annexation of Crimea, he stamped his legacy as a "gatherer of Russian lands"—the first ruler since Stalin to expand the country's territory. He has done all that and more despite repeated claims by foreign and some Russian observers that Russia is a declining power or merely, in the words of the late [senator John McCain](#), a "gas station masquerading as a country."

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The Russian leader's domestic political and foreign policy trajectory suggests that as he enters his third decade at the helm and approaches his seventieth birthday, he is thinking about his legacy. With the constitutional changes introduced in 2020, there are no formal constraints on his ability to rule Russia until 2036, if not even longer.

But there is one major piece of unfinished business that is still missing from Putin's roster of accomplishments if he is to consolidate his reputation as the leader who returned Russia to its former greatness. That piece of unfinished business is the restoration of Russia's dominion over

key parts of its historic empire. No item on that agenda is more important—or more pivotal—than the return of Ukraine to the fold.

For the Russian president and his team, the restoration of the Slavic heartland of the former empire—in some form, not necessarily as the USSR 2.0—is not just geopolitical. It is also generational, strategic, and personal. Increasingly, most evidence suggests that Putin was being sincere when he said the [USSR's breakup](#) was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century.” He has returned to this theme in one form or another on various occasions throughout the years.

GENERATIONAL NOSTALGIA AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

The Soviet regime was good to Putin's generation—that is, the current leadership in the Kremlin. These are men in their sixties and seventies whose parents belonged to the Soviet Union's “greatest generation” that fought, nearly lost, and then won the war against Nazi Germany. Putin's own background is typical in this regard: born to working-class parents of modest means in postwar Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), he gained admission to a prestigious university and embarked on a promising career, especially for someone without family or political connections, in the KGB, an elite institution and key pillar of the Soviet regime. He even got a foreign tour—not a plum posting to a capitalist country, only to East Germany, but one that still brought him material benefits not available to most Soviet citizens.

All of that collapsed in 1991, leaving Putin's generation of up-and-coming state servants at a loss, yearning for the return to the good old days of stability, prestige, and recognition of their country as a superpower. For that generation, the standoff with the West did not begin in 2014; it goes all the way back to the 1960s.

Important as it is, generational nostalgia for the old empire has an enduring strategic rationale behind it, which suggests that Russia's policy toward its neighbors is not likely to change dramatically even after the Putin generation leaves the stage. Strategic depth—the buffer between the Russian heartland and powerful European adversaries—has long been a critical requirement for the security of the Russian state. This quest for strategic depth has defined the Kremlin's policy since the times of Peter the Great, if not earlier. Strategic depth saved Russia from defeat in 1812 when Napoleon's armies captured Moscow and in 1941 when Hitler's armies marched almost to the gates of the Soviet capital.

With the collapse of the USSR and the expansion of NATO, Russia has lost that strategic depth. Regaining it is an essential requirement of Russian security policy that has endured through centuries, revolutions, and government changes. Over time, advancements in military technology and cyber tools may affect the importance Russian leaders ascribe to strategic depth, but in general it is likely to remain a top priority.

THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN

No part of the Russian and Soviet empires has played a bigger and more important role in Russian strategy toward Europe than the crown jewel, Ukraine. The country is essential to Russian security for many reasons: its size and population; its position between Russia and other major European powers; its role as the centerpiece of the imperial Russian and Soviet economies; and its deep cultural, religious, and linguistic ties to Russia, particularly Kyiv's history as the cradle of Russian statehood.

And no part of the Soviet Union played a bigger part in its dissolution than Ukraine. Ukraine's declaration of independence in the wake of the failed August 1991 coup, which was reaffirmed in the December 1, 1991, referendum, spelled the end of the Soviet Union. The union could not continue without Ukraine, the closest, most important partner to Russia in the Soviet Union construct. The terms of the divorce were finalized a week later by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

THIS TIME IT'S PERSONAL

Thus, Ukraine is the locus of both the generational and the strategic in Russian foreign and security policy. It is also personal for Putin.

That is because during his two decades at the helm he has tried and failed repeatedly to restore Ukraine to its—rightful as he sees it—place in Russia's orbit. The first opportunity to do so presented itself to Putin in 2004, when Ukraine was choosing a new president. The choice back then came down to two candidates—the West-leaning Viktor Yushchenko and the Russia-leaning

Viktor Yanukovich. The Kremlin unleashed an all-out propaganda campaign in support of Yanukovich. A few weeks before the vote, Yushchenko was poisoned with dioxin, almost died, and was badly disfigured. The culprit behind the attempt on his life was never established conclusively. The fraudulent election was derailed by the Orange Revolution and, eventually, a new vote was scheduled, which Yushchenko won. It was a major setback for Putin who had [personally](#) intervened to tip the scale in favor of Yanukovich.

Putin almost got his revenge in 2010, however, in Ukraine's next presidential election, which his man Yanukovich won. But the victory proved a disappointment. Yanukovich turned out to be a [frustrating](#) partner for Putin. Among other things, he engaged in negotiations with the EU about a series of important agreements to boost Ukraine's ties with Europe just as Putin kept trying to pull Ukraine back into Russia's economic and political orbit.

The ultimate blow to Putin's ambitions was delivered in 2014, when Yanukovich, facing mass unrest, fled the country and a new, pro-Western government came to power. Putin's moves to annex Crimea and launch a war in eastern Ukraine advanced his domestic legacy and preserved his tactical leverage. But they backfired strategically in terms of reinforcing Ukraine's pro-Western orientation and Russia's international isolation.

There is little doubt that Ukraine is the single most important piece of unfinished business as the Russian leader contemplates his agenda for the remainder of his time in office and his legacy.

THE PIVOTAL MOMENT?

Putin's obsession with Ukraine reached an unprecedented level in 2021. Throughout the year, his pronouncements have acquired a quality not observed since 2014. In July, he published a long [treatise](#) on Ukraine, which amounted to no less than a historical, political, and security predicate for invading it—if and when that ever became necessary.

The essence of the long article can be reduced to several key points:

- Ukraine is not and has never been an independent state;
- Ukraine is an inalienable part of Russia lacking a distinct ethnic identity, culture, religion, and language—its very name is derived from the Russian word “periphery”;
- Territorially, what is now independent Ukraine has no basis in history and is comprised of lands acquired by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union;
- Ukraine has always prospered when part of Russia and suffered when not;
- Ukraine's independence has always been inspired and sponsored by enemies of Russia who have used it as a weapon against Russia.

Putin's pronouncements since the publication of this [woefully inaccurate reinterpretation](#) of Ukraine's history and its relationship with Russia have reflected a new sense of urgency missing from his earlier statements on the subject. In the past several months, the Russian president has described NATO's activities in Ukraine and the growth of Ukraine's military capabilities as a [threat](#) to Russian [security](#) and a “[redline](#).” One would be hard pressed to find another instance when the Russian leader used the latter term in relation to Ukraine or in other contexts.

Since then, Putin's rhetoric against Ukraine as a tool of Russia's enemies has been picked up and amplified by Russian officialdom. State-sponsored propaganda ranges from nightly bashing of Ukraine on Russian TV to a recent [article](#) by former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev. (Medvedev now serves as deputy chairman of the Security Council.) It no longer made any sense to negotiate with Ukrainian leaders, wrote Medvedev, because they were mere puppets in the hands of their Western sponsors interested in Ukraine only as a tool of their efforts to contain and harm Russia.

The stepped-up Kremlin [rhetoric](#), coupled with more recent reports of the movements of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine, raises a troubling (yet all too familiar) question: What does Putin want?

NOT ANOTHER FROZEN CONFLICT

A political solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine has been elusive because Moscow's interpretation of the hastily agreed 2015 Minsk terms for a cease-fire proved unacceptable for Kyiv and vice versa. High-level diplomatic efforts such as the Normandy process led by France and Germany have consistently fallen far short of their goals. U.S.-EU sanctions have failed to alter Russia's strategic calculus on Ukraine. Taken together, these factors made it easy

for [some observers](#) to conclude that nothing in the eastern Ukraine standoff was likely to change in the foreseeable future and that it would more or less resemble other post-Soviet frozen conflicts on the periphery of Russia.

But Ukraine is not like any other former Soviet country. When viewed from the Kremlin, the situation in eastern Ukraine is nothing to be complacent about. Putin and other Russian leaders still appear genuinely anxious about the possibility that Ukraine might eventually join NATO, even though Western leaders like Biden have said that [school's out](#) on this issue. More significant for the Kremlin is the fact that Ukrainian defense capabilities are likely to increase steadily regardless of what happens on the NATO membership track.

Equally worrisome for the Kremlin is the [prospect](#) of a qualitative upgrading of Ukraine's security apparatus in such areas as intelligence, cyber, and political subversion vis-à-vis Russia, all thanks to generous funding and ongoing partnerships with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western countries. The recent use of Turkish-supplied armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) showed that Ukraine is capable of employing new capabilities in ways that get Moscow's attention. Turkey's role is particularly sensitive, given its involvement in battlefield setbacks suffered by Russian-backed and -armed forces in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh since 2019.

After nearly disappearing overnight during the Revolution of Dignity in early 2014, a stronger Ukrainian state is emerging. Despite its limitations, Ukrainian resistance to the Kremlin's military intervention and pressure campaign has prevented Moscow from controlling more than just a modest portion of the Donbas region and the Crimean Peninsula.

But Putin either cannot or pretends not to understand that Ukraine does not fit his image of an authoritarian kleptocracy or essentially an Eastern European version of Afghanistan, where the U.S.-backed government and security forces buckled practically overnight under concerted pressure. The fact that Ukrainian President Volodymyr [Zelenskyy](#) beat the incumbent by nearly three-to-one in a free and fair election in 2019 appears to be lost on Putin. In the country that he [describes](#),

the Ukrainian people are not and will not be permitted to legally form a government that would directly serve the interests of the Ukrainian people. People are even afraid to participate in public opinion surveys. [They] are afraid because a small group of people has anointed themselves with the laurels of victors in the struggle for independence. They hold extreme political views. They really run Ukraine regardless of who is nominally the head of state.

Taken together, these developments represent another potentially problematic trend. The Kremlin increasingly views Ukraine as a Western aircraft carrier parked just across from Rostov Oblast in southern Russia. Ukraine is now one of the largest recipients of [U.S. military assistance](#), a fact that surely is not lost on anyone in the Russian national security establishment.

There can be little doubt that Russia's intelligence apparatus is closely monitoring the activities of Western governments on Ukrainian soil. But it cannot stop them. Such security, political, information, and cyber efforts must look increasingly threatening and destabilizing to the Kremlin, which is itself oblivious to the fact that all of these activities are the by-product of Putin's misguided onslaught on a once-friendly neighboring country.

The war scare in early 2021 was a reminder to both Kyiv and Washington that Russia retains escalation dominance in any conceivable conflict scenario. The ongoing troop movements in areas along the Russian-Ukrainian border help foster a sense of unease and unpredictability about the Kremlin's intentions. With limited—at best—strategic warning and other issues competing for the attention of Western leaders, the obstacles facing potential Russian military moves may look manageable to Putin.

THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE

It would be a risky proposition to assume that Putin has made his peace with the status quo or that he is unwilling to push the envelope once again over Ukraine. The spring 2021 war scare and the 2018 Kerch Strait incident both exposed the limits of Western support for Ukraine and served as vivid illustrations of the fact that neither NATO as a whole, nor the United States or any other individual member of the alliance, is prepared to risk war with Russia over Ukraine.

By the same token, the track record of Western analysts in 2013–2014 in predicting Kremlin actions in Ukraine should foster humility about our ability to anticipate Russian actions. Putin's

decision to annex Crimea and to launch an undeclared, brutal war in Donbas went well beyond what most observers, us included, ever expected.

Moreover, as cold and calculating as Putin may often appear, one aspect of his temperament should not be overlooked—a tendency to act emotionally and to lash out precipitously in ways that don't always make “sense” to outside observers. On one level, Putin undoubtedly is thinking about his legacy as one of Russia's most consequential rulers; he will want the Ukraine situation to be settled before he leaves power, whenever that is. On another level, Zelenskyy has taken a series of measures since 2020—a crackdown on Putin's close friend Viktor Medvedchuk and his media holdings, for instance—that surely anger Putin on a personal as well as geopolitical level.

Zelenskyy also [mocked](#) Putin and issued a biting [reply](#) to his long treatise about Ukraine. It is possible that Ukraine and its partners have already crossed some of Putin's redlines, perhaps unknowingly.

If the prospect of Russian re-invasion of Ukraine is real and the strategic objective is to force Kyiv into political and geopolitical capitulation, how would Putin go about achieving it? What operational objectives would he set out to achieve?

There are four potential broad areas where the Kremlin could push to break the status quo, reverse the negative trajectory facing the Russian interests identified above, and try to achieve its goal of a more compliant Ukraine. They are listed below in order of probability and the weight of the associated costs.

1. LIMITS ON FOREIGN MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN AND AROUND UKRAINE

Putin's rhetoric in recent months has begun portraying the exploitation or absorption (in Russian, освоение) of Ukraine's territory by hostile foreign powers as an unacceptable threat to Russian security. Yet the United States and its allies are highly unlikely to agree to negotiate explicit limits on what they can and cannot do in Ukraine. They will not allow Russia to designate Ukraine as a keep-away zone or to impose restrictions on the kinds of weapons that they can supply to its military. Still, Moscow could try to use its threatening military deployments and other forms of pressure short of a direct intervention to artificially elevate tensions in and around the region and to make Ukraine's partners more hesitant and risk-conscious.

Such pressure, bolstered by the kind of public and private messaging at which the Kremlin excels, would enable it to stir anxiety that “something” might happen if the West doesn't heed its concerns. In response, less hawkish NATO members (for example, Germany) may look for ways to calm things down and to plead for greater Western restraint. Such divisions in the Western camp are, of course, useful in their own right for the Kremlin's purposes.

At the same time, the Kremlin's provocative moves in March and April 2021 showed that its pressure campaign can ricochet in unexpected ways. Russian saber-rattling then reinvigorated flagging Western support for Ukraine and strengthened the case for stepped-up U.S./NATO defense cooperation with Kyiv and more visible U.S./NATO military activities and presence in the Black Sea and various NATO frontline countries. As a result, relaxation of Western sanctions is a topic broached by only the most committed pro-Kremlin voices in EU policy circles.

2. FORCIBLE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MINSK ACCORDS

The Kremlin's exasperation at Kyiv's seven-year-long failure to implement the Minsk accords, which it imposed on Kyiv at the barrel of a gun, may lead it to use force to make Kyiv follow through on provisions of the agreements that have long been political nonstarters for Ukrainian leaders. Specifically, the [Russian vision](#) of the full implementation of the Minsk accords entails a series of moves to federalize Ukraine, to grant far-ranging autonomy to the Russian-controlled statelets in Donbas, and, by so doing, to make formal Ukraine's neutral status and, perhaps, to end its existence as a sovereign country. (Moscow has thinly disguised hopes that other regions of Ukraine would seek to negotiate comparable arrangements with the central government.)

Depending on the scale of what the Kremlin decides to do, it may assume (perhaps wrongly) that the risks are manageable and that it will be difficult for the Biden administration to rally European support for more sanctions. For example, it is easy to envision a surge in violence along the line of contact in response if Ukraine were to conduct additional armed UAV strikes against Russian positions. Alternatively, Moscow might attempt a modest expansion of the territory it controls in eastern Ukraine under the guise of protecting the civilian population against Ukrainian attacks or to use the threat of a larger invasion to compel the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from specific

areas. The Ukrainian military may not be able to hold back even a limited Russian push across the line of contact. The West's lack of commitment to fight for Ukraine could even create political blowback for leaders who have publicly declared their support for Ukraine.

3. BRIDGING THE GAP

During earlier phases of the conflict, there was speculation that Moscow might try to expand the territory it controls. Discussion centered on possible seizure of the Soviet-era canal that supplies crucial water resources to the Crimean Peninsula, the port city of Mariupol, or the remaining Ukrainian-controlled territory along the Sea of Azov coastline all the way to Crimea that could create a land bridge to the peninsula. (Crimea is presently connected to Russia by a single bridge built in 2018.)

Any such incursion would almost certainly entail the longer-term challenge of administering and maintaining security in newly seized territories. Unlike the previous scenario, an outright expansion of the zone of occupation could make additional U.S.-EU sanctions—perhaps cancellation of the controversial Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, sectoral sanctions against Russian oil and gas firms, or restrictions on state-owned banks—all the more likely, if not inevitable. However, standard [Western assumptions](#) (for example, that Putin is a rational actor and would never do that, that it all sounds way too risky, and so on) do not shed much light on how the situation is actually viewed from the Kremlin's perspective.

4. FULL-SCALE ONSLAUGHT

As described above, Putin's attachment to Ukraine often takes on emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical overtones. His pronouncements don't align with reality, let alone with how Ukraine is viewed by most Western or Russian observers. It is conceivable that moves in recent months by Zelenskyy and other players have simply pushed too many of Putin's buttons.

Publicly [available assessments](#) suggest that the Ukrainian military would find it very difficult to defend against any large-scale Russian military operation. Some are downright [pessimistic](#) about its capabilities. Ukrainian holdings of systems like U.S. Javelin anti-tank missiles would not necessarily be enough to make the Kremlin more hesitant in calculating the cost of military action. Some analysts have suggested that the Kremlin could stage a rapid military onslaught to break the back of the Ukrainian military and force it to retreat behind the Dnieper River. This would position the Kremlin to control what is commonly referred to as "left-bank Ukraine," including the historic part of Kyiv, which in Putin's estimation makes up an inalienable part of the great Russian state. Presumably, the Kremlin might even try to install a puppet government in Kyiv and declare it "mission accomplished."

But there is abundant reason to be skeptical about whether the Kremlin is eager to take on the long-term task of occupying and administering such a vast territory. Ukrainian forces and insurgent groups would almost certainly seek to make any mission along these lines as costly as possible. Even if presented with a fait accompli, the Biden administration would likely find great receptivity in Western Europe for steps to punish the Kremlin and reassure NATO allies worried about further Russian moves.

WHAT WILL PUTIN DO?

These four potential courses of action do not exhaust the range of options before Putin. They all share one thing in common—to an outside observer not steeped in Putin's thinking, all of them make little sense. Some, like the full-scale onslaught option, are certain to incur major new costs. Others, even if relatively insignificant in terms of additional land acquisitions, like the land bridge to Crimea, would not be cost-free either. But they would be certain to reinforce Ukraine's collective consciousness that Russia is a mortal enemy and there can be no way back for Ukraine to Russia's orbit. That conviction is certain to be reinforced by any and all courses of action sketched out in the preceding paragraphs.

However, if there is any lesson that Putin and his Kremlin cohort should have learned in the course of the seven years since Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, it's that the annexation of Crimea and the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine have only [reinforced](#) the Ukrainian people's resolve to leave Russia's orbit and to seek closer ties to the West. Clearly, that lesson has not been learned in the Kremlin, which means that it is guided by a different logic and that its current bout of saber-rattling has to be taken seriously.



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