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Thematic section

The Russia-Ukraine War: Why the Conflict Was Not Prevented

Can ‘Realists’ and ‘Hawks’ Agree? Half-measures and Compromises on the Road to Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

The debate on the failure of the efforts to avert the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is dominated by two narratives presented as mutually exclusive. On the one hand, ‘hawks’ chastise the West for failing to forcefully confront Russian adventurism earlier. On the other hand, ‘realists’ criticise the West’s overreach in efforts to incorporate Ukraine into the Western structures. Both views implicitly contend that there was only one way to prevent the war. This paper argues that those positions are, in fact, not incompatible and failure to prevent war lies in the habitual mismatch between strategic goals and resources, implicitly recognised by both sides of the debate. Ambitious goals and meagre resources constituted a middle-of-the-road compromise, inadvertently increasing the risk of the war by encouraging Russia to take the opportunity to challenge the West’s weakly backed ambitions. In an attempt to draw some tentative lessons, the paper concludes by exploring some hypotheses on why such mismatches between goals and resources occur and persist.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, realism, strategy

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, also described as a dramatic escalation of the war in Donbas ongoing ever since 2014, shocked much of the world, if not necessarily most international relations scholars¹. Given the incredible and mounting human and economic costs of the conflict, as well its transformative potential for European, if not global, political order, it inevitably raises much discussion on how such a catastrophe could have been averted. Unhelpfully, the stakes of the failure often make the discussion an exercise in finger pointing.

Two notable and seemingly contradictory positions on causes and, consequently, the possibility of prevention of the war emerged. One, promoted by those who could be described as 'hawks', emphasises the imperialistic bent of the Russian leadership, which was determined to dominate its neighbours, if not outright re-establish the whole of Eastern Europe as its sphere of influence. Those subscribing to this view argue that the war is a consequence of failure to adequately punish previous Russian transgressions and deter its ambitions toward Ukraine. The other position, for simplicity ascribed in this text to 'realists', touts reasonability (if not necessarily legitimacy) or Russian concerns about the expansion of Western influence in its neighbourhood and accordingly argues that war could have been averted if the West did not suffer from hubris of attempting to expand into Russia's neighbourhood.

The viciousness of the clash between the two views is all the more futile given the recency of the event and paucity of available information. While it is hardly an option to wholly postpone the debate about the causes of the invasion and possibilities for averting it until historians sink their teeth into the current events, it is important to stress the inherent limits of attempting to draw lessons from current and at the time of writing still ongoing events.² With this caveat in mind, this paper attempts to contribute to the debate on the failure to avert the invasion of Ukraine.

Three further important caveats need to be noted before previewing the argument structure of the paper. The first is the normative dimension of the debate

¹ TRIP project snap survey of US IR scholars conducted between 16 December 2021 and 27 January 2022 showed that 56.1 percent scholars expected Russia to use military force against Ukrainian military forces or additional parts of the territory of Ukraine where it was not currently operating, with only 22.2 percent being of the opposite opinion (Entringer Garcia Blanes 2022).

² Additionally, given the recency of the events, the paper to a large degree relies on non-peer reviewed literature, both regarding the latest information on invasion and reasoning of Russian side and on views of different camps on causes of war.

about possible war prevention. While the war has wrought fearsome costs and destruction in Ukraine, its long-term consequences are difficult to predict. The choice between compromising one's (vital) interests or fighting a costly war in an attempt to preserve them is a right of the Ukrainian people. While this article attempts to explore ways in which war could have been prevented, it does not try to ascribe normative value to those possibilities.

The second caveat concerns the complexity of causal antecedents of such a momentous event. It is important to recognise that there might have been many counterfactual scenarios in which war would not happen, and any attempt to discern all would be analytically both challenging and likely futile. In order to limit the scope and provide meaningful insight, the paper focuses rather narrowly on a particular aspect of the Western (grand)strategic approach to the integration of Ukraine into the West.³ But this should not be conflated with a claim of exclusivity of discussed possibilities for avoiding the Russian invasion.

Finally, the third caveat concerns the possible judgmental nature of the posited argument regarding the Western political decision of the last decades. More often than not, scholarly work benefits from hindsight denied to those making the decisions. While the arguments posited in this paper can be read as a damning judgement of past failures, it should be kept in mind that those making the decisions cannot predict all of their outcomes (Garfinkle 2003).

With those caveats in mind, the primary goal of the paper is to show that while the debate between 'realists' and 'hawks' became quite vicious in the aftermath of the invasion, their arguments are, in fact, not as incompatible and irreconcilable as it may seem, as they share the same complaint about lack of investment of the West into containing Russia and supporting Ukraine. The key difference lies in optimism or lack thereof on the question of whether such investment into reaching stated goals was feasible and desirable prewar. Beyond this argument, the paper argues that failure to address this mismatch between the aims and resources likely bears significant responsibility for the failure to avert the war. Lastly, the paper offers several tentative hypotheses on why this mismatch was not addressed that can guide future research.

The first section discusses recent scholarly explanations of the causes of war or failure to prevent it, respectively, highlighting the (in)compatibility of those explanations and stressing their underlying assumptions. The second section introduces what is known or can be assumed so far about the invasion, drawing implications of those assumptions for the possibility of averting the war. The

³ It is obviously a major oversimplification to treat 'the West' as a single entity. Nonetheless, the West is used in this work on three grounds. First is the need for simplification given the scope of the posed issue and limited space. Second is the relatively common reference to 'the West' in the broader debate on the issue. The third is that pursuit of Western unity in policy towards Ukraine and Russia was a significant feature of the policy and negotiations before and indeed during the invasion.

third and last section illustrates the mismatch between ambition and action in the West's policy towards Ukraine and discusses tentative hypotheses on why this mismatch occurred and persisted. The conclusion attempts to draw some tentative lessons for current and future Western policies.

Realists and others

As was noted in the introduction, two distinct broad narratives about the possibility of averting the war dominate the discussion after the invasion onset. Both are worthy of closer inspection as both arguably offer important insights. Ironically, both sides also radiate a notable degree of feelings of validation of their long-running views (e.g. Walt 2022c).

The first could be broadly described as a realist narrative, which sees attempts to integrate Ukraine into Western structures as a step too far bound to invite the wrath of Russia, as great powers seek spheres of influence in their neighbourhood in pursuit of security. True to the realist roots of this line of thinking, the question of the legitimacy of the security concerns is not at the forefront of this narrative. The narrative focuses on the predictability of the Russian opposition and the lengths to which Russia is ready to go to prevent the slipping of Ukraine towards the West. Russia is seen as intervening in Ukraine out of genuine concern for its security, irrespective of what other states might think of the validity of those concerns.

Within the narrative, Western efforts to push the boundaries of integration into the Western structures ever further eastward to Russia's borders was strategic folly based on idealism and liberalism, on which the West and, in particular, the United States should not embark as it was bound to engulf the United States in conflict with Russia. The Russian invasion is one of the products of this liberal hubris and failure to heed realist warnings. As succinctly put by Stephen M. Walt:

That Putin bears direct responsibility for the invasion is beyond question, and his actions deserve all the condemnation we can muster. But the liberal ideologues who dismissed Russia's repeated protests and warnings and continued to press a revisionist program in Europe with scant regard for the consequences are far from blameless. Their motives may have been wholly benevolent, but it is self-evident that the policies they embraced have produced the opposite of what they intended, expected, and promised. And they can hardly say today that they weren't warned on numerous occasions in the past. (Walt 2022b).

Policy prescriptions based on this view of the situation were largely consistent before and after the invasion. Russia pursues its security and can be

reasoned and compromised with. The prime suggested accommodation of the Russian interests to be made – consistently with the causal claims on causes of conflict – would be ruling out Ukrainian membership in NATO (e.g. Charap 2022). Those compromises would be detrimental to Ukraine, which is something not lost on those subscribing to this view.⁴ But those compromises would be preferable to war and a breakdown in relations between the West and Russia (e. g. Charap 2021). The fact that those compromises would undercut the liberal project of NATO and EU expansion is indeed, from this perspective, a feature, not a bug. The whole basic line, once again consistent with realist arguments about a number of other issues, is that the ambitions should be limited to avoid hubris.

Notably, one important feature of the view is its inherently particularistic view, where the recommendations cannot be viewed as universally valid and best for all actors – and the realist narrative centres strongly on benefits and drawbacks for the United States, which obviously wins it little support in Eastern Europe in particular. This is a feature in which this narrative differs markedly from the other group.

The second group can be roughly described as ‘hawks’, who see current Russia as an imperialist state committed to the domination of their neighbours. Contrary to the realist view, they see security interests stated by Russia as illegitimate or even fraudulent. They see Russian ambitions regarding Ukraine as another step in fulfilling Russian imperialist ambition, which extends further to restore control not only over post-soviet countries but also former satellites in Central Europe. Many subscribing to this view also see the conflict as a confrontation between autocratic Russia and democratic neighbours, often claiming fear of the success of democratic Ukraine as one of the rationales for the conflict (e. g. Applebaum in Ketleriené 2022).

Similarly to the realist account, the ‘hawkish’ account also stresses the continuation of Moscow’s aggression as predictable, albeit for different reasons, and feels the same degree of validation of their warnings about the aggressive Russian imperialism. If realists criticise the Western ambition, which in their view amounts to hubris, lamenting the misguided policies of last decades, hawks are no more content with the Western approach to Russia in previous years, criticising the lack of effort and investment in fulfilling those rightful ambitions.

4 As noted by Mearheimer in an interview: ‘In an ideal world, it would be wonderful if the Ukrainians were free to choose their own political system and to choose their own foreign policy’ (Mearsheimer in Chotiner 2022); or by Stephen M. Walt in an article: ‘the war has demolished the belief that war was no longer “thinkable” in Europe and the related claim that enlarging NATO eastward would create an ever-expanding “zone of peace.” Don’t get me wrong: It would have been wonderful had that dream come true, but it was never a likely possibility and all the more so given the hubristic way it was pursued’ (Walt 2022b).

The particular feature of the Western policy approach with scorn by hawks is the lack of forceful response to what they see as a long line of conflicts demonstrating the aggressive nature of imperial Russia. To cite Vakhitov and Zaika, ‘For almost three decades, Western leaders have approached successive acts of Russian imperial aggression as isolated incidents and have sought to downplay their significance while focusing on the economic advantages of continuing to do business with Moscow. This has only served to encourage the Kremlin. The Chechen wars of the early post-Soviet years were followed by the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the 2014 seizure of Crimea. The current war is the latest milestone in this grim sequence, but it will not be the last’ (Vakhitov & Zaika 2022).

Notably, the gap between forceful rhetoric and subsequent lacklustre action is also noted among grievances. ‘Throughout the past few decades, we have frequently heard similarly tough talk from Western leaders whenever they have found themselves confronted by the reality of Russian aggression. Unfortunately, the promised responses are never actually decisive. Instead of deterring the Kremlin, such posturing undermines the credibility of the West’ (Khidasheli 2022). While those complaints regarding Western conduct towards Russia are general, the same can be said about the case of Ukraine in particular, which should have received more support in advance of the possible Russian invasion. As described by Anne Applebaum in an interview, ‘We could do more. We should have done more already. In other words, I think preparing Ukraine for this kind of invasion is a project that should have started seven years ago, the time to start this preparation was in 2015. It wasn’t done. The Obama administration didn’t take it seriously enough, the Trump administration was not interested in defending Ukraine. And although there has been military aid going into Ukraine, I don’t think it’s anything like the scale that was needed’ (Applebaum in Ketleriené 2022).

Based on the brief introduction above, it is true that the two views are truly contradictory both in the realm of their causal theory behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine and their policy prescriptions. But they share important and largely unrecognised common ground in one particular analytical insight. Both sides bemoan the gap between Western ambitions and rhetoric on one side and actions on the other side. While realists consider the ambitions and rhetoric unrealistic and misguided and suggest recalibration, hawks call for actions and resources to match the rhetoric. Importantly, a major point of disagreement between the two views is whether averting the war would actually be desirable given the future costs it might entail. But as far as the narrow focus of this article is concerned, and as is discussed below, both policy prescriptions could have possibly averted the war if applied thoroughly. But neither of the policy prescriptions was followed, and the mismatch between ambition and rhetoric on one

side and actions and resources on the other side persisted. From this perspective, the irony of both sides feeling vindication of their arguments can be seen as basically correct, as the prescriptions of neither side were actually followed.

What is known and what can be assumed

Much is not known and might not be known for the foreseeable future until the dust settles and archives open. Yet, any effort to explore the possibilities for averting war necessitates some basic empirical investigation, however preliminary, to be based upon. In contrast to the previous section, exploring (implicitly) theoretical arguments both about Russian aims and motivations and Western response, here I outline what is known and what can be reasonably assumed about the Russian motivations and calculations leading to the aggression, attempting to draw implications for possible pathways that would prevent the war.

The focus of the section is informed both by the two theoretical positions discussed previously and by the broadly rationalist framework adopted by this paper. Rationalist focus can be perceived as fundamentally limiting given the prominent role many ascribe to ideological considerations in Russian leadership's hostility towards Ukraine and ultimately in the decision to launch the full invasion. Nonetheless, the paper proceeds with this frame of analysis on the basis of three arguments.

First, both theoretical perspectives discussed in the previous section more or less assume a degree of rationality in the Kremlin. Irrespective of their diverging assumptions about motivations and intentions, both arguments about the possibility of accommodation and the possibility of deterrence inevitably presume rational calculation on the part of Russia on whether or how to pursue its aims. Secondly, and relatedly, while ideological considerations almost certainly played a significant role in both motivating the invasion and causing misperceptions leading to its early failures (as is discussed below), their role does not preclude imperfectly but still rational calculation on whether to launch the invasion. Finally, a more ideational perspective on the causes of the invasion and possibilities for its aversion are already served by other contributions to this thematic section (cf. articles by Bendix, Myshlovska and Shevtsova in this issue).

Given the rationalist framework as well as both theoretical perspectives discussed above, the empirical discussion inevitably has to focus on two closely related questions regarding the invasion. The first is the question of aims and motivations – what Russia wanted and wants to achieve through the invasion. This question is crucial both to ascertain the value of the benefit in a presumed cost-benefit analysis done in the Kremlin and to gauge the possibility of accommodation of Russian interests. The second question is about Russia's calculations and expectations regarding the course of operation, its costs and its chances of

success. The second question is crucial for ascertaining the possibility of deterring the invasion.

Uncovering the motivations and aims that led Moscow to embark on the invasion is a considerably contentious issue, which was inevitably touched on in the previous section. While there is at this point no way to establish the motivation with any kind of certainty, some basic assumptions are both necessary and possible. Three challenges make this enterprise difficult. First, it is quite unlikely that any single motivation could explain the invasion alone, and it is difficult to assign relative weight to different motivations. Second, while there is no shortage of statements of Putin and other Russian officials on the subject, many are contradictory,⁵ and none can be taken at face value, especially given the widely recognised level of propaganda employed by the Kremlin both internationally and towards the domestic audience. Third, the motivations and goals of the war can shift after its start in reaction to success or failure on the battlefield and changes in both domestic and international contexts. Even if assumed to be genuine, declarations on the purpose of war after its start cannot be relied upon in determining original motivations. Despite those challenges, it is useful to view a broad spectrum of plausible motivations, not least to demonstrate the difficulty of accommodating any number of them to avert the invasion.

A recent article by Götz and Staun (2022) puts forward Russian strategic culture as a framework enabling the Russian invasion can serve as a starting point. They argue that two main pillars of Russian strategic culture, namely deep-seated fear of invasion and desire for great power status entailing sphere of influence in their combination, created space for launching the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The utility of this framework lies in its explicit recognition of the interlinked nature of different drivers of the invasion. While two perspectives introduced in the previous section emphasise either Russian imperialism in its neighbourhood or Russian insecurity as seemingly opposing theses about Russian motivations, Götz and Staun (2022) stress the importance of a combination of fear (insecurity) and desire for great power status and sphere of influence (imperialism).

While Russian strategic culture can be seen as universal, it is also important to recognise the special place of Ukraine in particular in Russian thinking. This is given both by its size and economic importance (Götz & Staun 2022: 486–7), making it the most important of the in-between countries between the Western alliances and Russia (Charap & Colton 2018) but also by their emotional and ideological relationship (Kazharski 2022). All these motivations point, albeit pos-

⁵ The clearest example of this can be seen in Putin's varying justifications for the invasion, for example differing rhetoric of his speech on 24 February 2022 citing security concerns and grievances (Putin 2022) compared to the rather imperialistic rhetoric of his remarks on 6 June 2022 (Reuters 2022).

sibly to different degrees, to the Russian desire to keep and dominate Ukraine within its sphere of influence.

In this central goal, the goals toward Ukraine are deeply intertwined with the relationship with the West, as Ukraine was an (active) subject of years of increasingly escalated competition between Russia and the West (Charap & Colton 2018; Stanovaya 2022). Dominating Ukraine within its sphere of influence is clearly seen as incompatible with Ukraine's aspirations to become a member of both NATO and the EU, which was long and loudly opposed by Russia and often reiterated both publicly and privately (e.g. Charap & Colton 2018), including in Putin's speeches before the invasion inception. Indeed, it is important to recognise the degree to which the conflict is perceived by Putin as part of the confrontation with the West more broadly (Stanovaya 2022; Hushcha 2022). The motivation for the war was, therefore, most likely to a considerable degree about Western recognition of Russia's status and perceived concerns and grievances.

One possible motivation for the invasion was relatively underplayed in the debates while it might have had important implications for the possibility of averting the war. When the boons of possible Russian military operations against Baltic countries were contemplated in the years after the seizure of Crimea, it was noted that the failure of NATO to defend 'every inch' of the territory of Baltic members would unravel the Alliance as a whole (Chang 2017; Veebel 2018: 240; cf. Shifrinson 2017). This would be a major victory for Russia and possibly one of the rationales for the operation. While Ukraine is obviously not a member of NATO, and the situation is therefore different, it should be noted that Russian success without a strong response from NATO would likely have major ramifications for the unity of the Alliance as well as the credibility of NATO's verbal commitments. While the impact would not be comparable to failure to defend member states, the risks and costs would be far lower. Efforts to call the perceived bluff of the West and especially the United States should not be discounted as one of the possible motivations for the invasion.

Possibly less contentious assumptions can be made about calculations that led Moscow to assess the invasion as a viable course of action.⁶ Those can be broadly described in three distinct categories: political assumptions about Ukraine, military assumptions about the balance of forces and international assumptions about the response to the invasion. Moscow's political assumption likely was that Ukrainians were politically divided and apathetic, with low trust in politicians, parties and most of the institutions, with trust in the office

6 While primarily possible rational sources of those assumptions are discussed below, it should be recognised that those assumptions were likely also based on ideational factors, including Putin's personal beliefs and biases regarding Ukraine, as well as the nature of Russian regime (see for example Götz & Staun 2022: 492; Gomza 2022).

of president at only 27 % and poor approval ratings of Zelensky⁷ (Raynolds & Walting 2022). Militarily, Moscow likely saw its military as significantly stronger than the Ukrainian force, whose performance and progress with modernisation received mixed reviews (Grant 2021; cf. Zagorodnyuk et al. 2021), whereas the Russian military had a positive recent track record from the seizure of Crimea, intervention in Donbas and expeditionary operations in Syria (Cancian 2022). Finally, it seems likely that Russia expected a disunited and distracted West, facing a freshly incumbent government in Germany and elections in France with transatlantic relations strained by the Trump era. The West was, therefore, likely presumed by Moscow to be unable to respond with sufficient speed to a quick operation (Cancian 2022), with a follow-up response being blunted by considerable preparations for future Western sanctions (Korsunskaya & Ostroukh 2022). Needless to say, almost all of those assumptions proved partially or wholly faulty so far (see for example Johnson 2022).

What does this discussion of Russian motivations and calculations tell us about the possibility of averting the war? The most important implication is that averting the war in the roughly half a year-long runup to the invasion would likely be very difficult. There was a multitude of plausible reasons for Russia to deem some degree of control over Ukraine as a vital interest. Both an accommodation of Russian demands and deterrence of Russian invasion were made more difficult by a combination of motivations and calculations.

Deterrence was made considerably more difficult by the apparent Russian assessment of (political) weakness of both Ukraine and the West. Notably, if the assumption that Russia did not expect to fight major operations against the Ukrainian military is correct, it means that reinforcing said military with more military hardware would likely have quite a limited impact on Russian decision-making. If Russian leadership did not expect Ukrainian soldiers to fight, their hardware would not matter. In a situation where Russia apparently expected the Ukrainian state to collapse, even the presence of Western troops in tripwire capacity would possibly not be enough to deter the invasion, as Russia could have assessed that those would not be harmed in relatively bloodless special operations and would not use force against Russian forces anyway, especially in the absence of organised Ukrainian armed resistance to invasion.

Notably, if the assumption about the Russian motivation of humbling NATO is correct, repeated Western verbal commitments to Ukraine and its territorial integrity and sovereignty might have actually, in some ways, encouraged the invasion if they were assessed as a bluff or otherwise implausible by Russia. For example, NATO Defence ministers issued a statement on 16 February 2022 (only

⁷ The source specifically report that Zelensky approval rating was at -34 (Raynolds & Walting 2022) but does not provide a reference point for that number and original documents are not available to the author.

eight days before the invasion commenced) that ‘We reaffirm our support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders’ (NATO 2022). Should NATO prove incapable of preventing the expected fait accompli (as Russia most likely assessed), it would be a significant blow to NATO’s reputation and credibility and the greater the prewar verbal commitment was, the greater the reputational cost Russian success would achieve.

Accommodation of the Russian demands would, in light of those motivations and calculations, be very difficult not to speak about political plausibility in the West and Ukraine. As the relations between the West and Russia soured, stakes arguably increased in view of both sides. The assumption of a quick, easy and successful operation likely made Russia bold about its demands. If the assumptions about Russian aims and expectations are correct, it would likely take a rather momentous concession to make Russia back down militarily, possibly amounting to acceding to maximalist demands made by Moscow at the end of 2021 (Tétrault-Farber & Balmforth 2021). Not only could Russia be concerned that the stars would not align again should the West or Ukraine fail to follow through with concessions, but major accommodation of Russian demands would fulfil the possible aim of humbling the United States and the West. Note also that while discussion of accommodation often focused on their possibility from a Ukrainian perspective (e.g. Charap 2021), to avert the war, major concessions would have to be made not only by Ukraine but importantly by NATO or the West (Stanovaya 2022).

Mismatch on the road to the invasion

This last section provides an illustration of the gap between ambitions and actions; however, not through extensive empirical investigation. The first section shows this to be a relatively uncontroversial claim, and it is not an ambition of this paper to provide a comprehensive discussion of either the general history of West-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War⁸ or provide an analysis of specific foreign policies of participating Western countries.⁹ Moreover, given the narrow focus of the contribution, the paper does not attempt to empirically investigate whether it was actually a different policy prescription of ‘realists’ and ‘hawks’ followed by different countries which produced the compromise. Rather, the goal is to illustrate the gap mostly by further developing a case of mismatch

⁸ There are number of sources which provide detailed empirical examination of the breakdown of relations between Russia and the West and development of policy of both towards Ukraine. See for example Sarotte (2021) or Charap and Colton (2017).

⁹ There is a wealth of literature both on EU-Russia relations (see for example Romanova & David 2021) and sources and developments of policies of individual countries towards Russia, including critical actors such as Germany (e.g. Frostberg 2016, Siddi 2020) or France (e.g. Cadier 2018).

between ambition and acts through key examples and discussing some possible hypotheses on why such gaps emerge.

The best illustrative case of the gap between ambition and action is the Bucharest declaration, which is often seen as the 'original sin' by both 'hawks' and 'realists'.¹⁰ The declaration concluded the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 and, in response to the aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), stated that 'NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO' (NATO 2008) without granting a MAP. The hawks feel that not going ahead with integrating Ukraine into NATO was the mistake leading ultimately to the 2022 invasion, while the realists contend that the resulting compromise needlessly alarmed Russia in the absence of any actual intention to follow through.

While the emptiness of the promise of membership is often reiterated nowadays, the perception of the strength of the promise was more diverse at the time. As Arbuthnot wrote at the time, '... what was ultimately agreed at Bucharest was far more significant [than a MAP]; a declaration by Alliance leaders that both Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of NATO. Not even a MAP provides such a categorical assurance' (2008: 43). In retrospect, as Charap and Colton note that 'Never before had NATO promised membership to aspirant states. The beleaguered leaders were making a necessary compromise to avoid a diplomatic meltdown. But once the parley was over, it became clear that the decision was the worst of all worlds: while providing no increased security to Ukraine and Georgia, the Bucharest Declaration reinforced the view in Moscow that NATO was determined to incorporate them at any cost' (2017: 88).

The wording was a notable ad hoc compromise between the United States and Eastern European¹¹ proponents of the eastern expansion of NATO and Western European opponents of the expansion, most notably France and Germany.¹² What is more interesting about the compromise is the specific form it took, which took or arguably even surpassed the ambitions of proponents of granting a MAP and an actual policy to follow through with these ambitions of the opponents. This pattern should be familiar to those who study national strategic documents, which often display a similar disparity between ambitious aims and comparatively meagre resources and strategies (see, for example, Alexander 2015: 82; Johnson 2011: 396; Schake 2020; Bonds et al. 2019: 1-5).

¹⁰ For an extremely deterministic view of the Bucharest declaration, see Zaryckyj (2018).

¹¹ Essentially all Eastern Europe NATO members with the exception of Hungary (Bounds & Hendrickson 2009: 23).

¹² But it should not be forgotten that opposition was broader, including also at the very least Italy, Hungary and three Benelux countries (Bounds & Hendrickson 2009: 23).

While it might be argued that taking an empirical example from fourteen years before the invasion is not representative of the period of the runup to the invasion, it is worth remembering that NATO to the last moment stuck to reiterating the continued validity of the Memorandum. Problems with such compromise extend beyond its middle-of-the-road nature, which may fall short of the intended aims of the policy it produces. It also arguably increases the chance of misperception both among external partners and adversaries, threatens the credibility and invites charges of hypocrisy and possibly also invites challenges aimed at undermining said credibility.

Why this specific form of compromise between proponents and opponents of a particular policy seemingly often prevails can be hypothesised both generally and in relation to Western policy towards Ukraine. Maintaining the ambition and commitment without actually taking many steps to follow through allows both sides to claim success, especially if the commitment is vague. Proponents likely see commitment as the first step on which to build further advocacy for action. Opponents presumably oppose policy mainly on the grounds of costs action would imply and see commitment as rather harmless as long as they retain the possibility to block following through with the commitment in the future. Importantly, such compromise can work as long as it is not challenged. Indeed, the belief that it will not be challenged, manifesting in this case in apparent scepticism of a number of countries about the likelihood of invasion, makes such compromise more likely.

In organisations such as NATO and the EU, where decision-making relies on unanimity while the number of members increases and the range of their interests and threat perception widens, the results of negotiations are even more likely to end up in a difficult compromise. Additionally, the degree to which the unity of those organisations is seen as a value in itself may help produce such compromises, which may fail to deliver desired results but satisfy the pursuit of unity. Additionally, and pertinently to the development of Western position towards Ukraine and Russia, the same factors that make compromise likely also make a change of course on this compromise difficult. In the absence of a tectonic shift in politics within NATO and/or the EU, major course change (to either side) from the middle road between accommodation and (extended) deterrence of Russia in relation to Ukraine was almost unimaginable.

As discussed in the previous section, the virtual stalemate in NATO maintaining a middle course towards Ukraine would most likely have to be significantly broken in the runup to the invasion if it was to be averted, which would amount to a foreign policy shift of momentous proportion within a number of Alliance member states. And without the shock of invasion actually happening,

such shifts would be difficult to imagine.¹³ Gould-Davies noted before the invasion that the United States' administration had to choose whether to appease or deter Russia in Ukraine (2021). Without compromising vaunted Western unity, going completely in one of the directions was nigh impossible.

Conclusion

The central theme of this thematic section was why the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not averted. This article argues that as long as we focus on the period in the runup to the 2022 invasion, war was neigh impossible to avert. Averting it would most likely require a radical shift of the Western position from a mismatch in ambition and action in the direction of either strong deterrence or wide-ranging accommodation of Russia. Any less would not avert the war, as Russian leadership felt it had a very strong position and was optimistic about the outcome of the invasion. Such a momentous shift was impossible without the impulse that the shock of invasion eventually delivered. Even with the invasion taking place and overall policy positions within the Western alliances shifted strongly in the confrontational direction, it remains to be seen how durable this shift will be and, most importantly, how effective the policies it produces will be.

At the same time, despite the incredible and mounting human and material costs of war to Ukraine and its people and increasingly also to the world more broadly, it is important to recognise that it is too soon to pass judgment on whether the war was the worst possible outcome for Ukraine or the West. It is quite possible that accommodation would lead to further Russian demands, the breakup of NATO and major instability in Eastern Europe. In the same vein, it is possible that even a strong deterrent posture would fail and embroil NATO in direct armed conflict with Russia, potentially leading to nuclear escalation. So far, while failing to avert the war, Western policymakers have managed to avoid both of those catastrophic results. Indeed, even limited actions far below the stated ambitions of bringing Ukraine into NATO almost certainly not only helped Ukraine prepare itself for the invasion but also vastly increased the chance of significant Western support when the invasion actually took place.

This contribution barely scratches the surface of various forces which produced the discrepancy between the ambitions and action in relation to Ukraine and Russia. But the sole fact that this discrepancy is among few points of agreement among two very different scholarly groups should suggest that its investigation is worthy of further effort. The questions of whether there actually was such a discrepancy, what national positions or international processes produced it if it did exist and what impacts such discrepancies have will surely develop the topic far beyond the arguments laid out in this paper.

¹³ On inertia and habit in case of the United States foreign policy, see for example Porter (2018).

Yet, one particular question and possible lesson stand out even from limited examination in this paper. As NATO and the EU continue to grow in size while their decision-making (on foreign policy in the case of the EU) remains consensus-based, it will likely become more and more difficult to pursue clear-cut strategies backed with resources. Consequently, the question of when is producing a unified position worth the compromises necessary to produce it will only gain in saliency. While, rather obviously, a unified position creates a larger power block, which should make the policy (or threat) more effective, especially in the area of sanctions. Beyond that, unity in one area may have a positive effect in other areas. But at the same time, the discussion above suggests how the compromise necessary to reach such a unified position may make it flawed or aimless.



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