

‘Now or never’: Putin’s Decision for War with Ukraine

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When and why President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine has been a matter of intense speculation since the massive build-up of Russian military forces along Ukraine’s borders in autumn 2021.

Theories and interpretations abound for the likely reasoning behind Putin’s decision for war with Ukraine. Some believe Putin’s actions are driven by an underlying geopolitical-ideological ambition, such as the restoration of the Soviet/Tsarist empire or Orthodox Russia’s desire for a civilizational struggle with the ‘decadent’ West. Others view his decision as belonging to a persistent, centuries-long pattern of Russian aggression, authoritarianism and expansionism. More parochial explanations include the belief Putin is waging war to shore up his domestic regime and popularity. Yet others argue it was a decision made by an isolated, egoistical dictator, supported by fawning courtiers, believing Russia’s invasion would be welcomed by his Ukrainian blood-brothers.

The fundamental limitation of all these putative explanations is that they lack documentary evidence. Attributed reasons for Putin’s decision are based not on proof but on a perceived pattern of events that are deemed apt for his assumed motivation. Maybe in decades to come more probative evidence will emerge from the Russian archives or other confidential sources. But, currently, the best guidance we have as to what Putin was thinking when he made his decision for war is twofold: what he said and what he did.

This paper traces the course of Putin’s decision-making from his public pronouncements. Putin’s own explanations of his actions cannot be accepted at face value: what he said at various meetings and press conferences in the run-up to the invasion were part and parcel of his propaganda battle with Ukraine and NATO. And his rhetoric may well have masked a pre-existing intention and determination to go to war for motives other than those he stated.

But history shows that while politicians do lie and dissemble – and Putin is no exception - what they say publicly invariably reflects a core of authentic belief. Their rhetoric both reflects and constructs their version of reality, however warped that may be. What may appear to onlookers as false, tendentious, exaggerated or irrational claims may make complete sense to the actors themselves.

Preventative War

On the eve of the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, many astute and well-informed commentators convinced themselves that the supposedly realistic and pragmatic Putin would not risk an attack.¹ Why, they asked rhetorically, would he undertake such a dangerous and risky operation, when his militarised diplomacy had already gained so much: faced with the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, the world had taken notice of Putin's security concerns, the west had agreed to talk with Moscow about them and during the ensuing negotiations had made some significant concessions. Moreover, with 150,000 Russian Federation troops massed on its borders, Ukraine was no immediate military threat to the Donbass, let alone Russia.

What these commentators missed was Putin's apocalyptic vision of a future nuclear-armed Ukraine embedded in NATO and intent on provoking a Russian-Western war. From this perspective, going to war to stop Ukraine from becoming yet another NATO bridgehead on Russia's borders was not a difficult decision to make. As is often the case in decision-making processes that result in drastic military action, the hard option, the statesmanlike choice, would have been for Putin to persist with diplomacy and accept the risks of remaining at peace with Ukraine.

If the public record is to be believed, Putin felt he had no choice but to wage a preventative war against Ukraine. Much like Kaiser Wilhelm II and his advisors in July 1914 when they urged Austria-Hungary to crush the Serbian threat to their empire before it was too late, Putin concluded that it was 'now or never' – invade Ukraine before NATO's position in the country became too strong to risk war. And the hard fighting of the actual war with Ukraine can only have reinforced that calculation of Putin's.²

A pre-emptive strike, supposedly to preclude an even bloodier conflict in the future, is a standard and familiar justification for an aggressive war, often accompanied by delusions of achieving a quick, easy and decisive victory.

To note that Putin believed he had been backed into a corner by the west is not to endorse his perceptions and assessments of the situation. Still less does it lend any justification to his actions. As I and other Russian studies specialists state elsewhere:

“The invasion is Putin's war, a war of choice not necessity. The prime responsibility for the conflict, and all its sorrowful, devastating and dangerous consequences, is his.”³

Yet, a better understanding of Putin's calculations may help to clarify how this calamity could have been averted and how an even greater catastrophe could be prevented.⁴

Militarised Diplomacy

My starting point for this analysis is Putin's meeting with leading Russian diplomats on 18 November 2021. His speech to an expanded session of his foreign ministry's Board previewed the new version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, a document then being drafted. His remarks ranged across varied topics - coronavirus, climate change, economic and security issues, Sino-Russian relations – but contained no surprises except that when speaking about Ukraine he turned to his Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and said: “It is imperative to push for serious, long-term guarantees that safeguard Russia's security in this direction because Russia can't be constantly thinking about what could happen there tomorrow”.

In making this point, Putin reiterated longstanding and repeated Russian complaints about NATO expansion and Ukraine's failure to implement the Minsk agreements on the conditional return of Donets and Lugansk to Ukrainian sovereignty. He also highlighted western supplies to Ukraine of modern lethal weapons, NATO's military manoeuvres close to Russia's borders, and the deployment of American anti-missile defence systems in Romania and Poland, which he claimed could easily be adapted for offensive purposes.⁵

Putin restated his demand for security guarantees at a December 1st ceremony welcoming new ambassadors to Moscow:

“The threat on our western border is really growing, and we have mentioned it many times. It is enough to see how close NATO military infrastructure has moved to Russia's borders. This is more than serious for us. In this situation, we are taking appropriate military-technical measures...

While engaging in dialogue with the United States and its allies, we will insist on the elaboration of concrete agreements that would rule out any further eastward expansion of NATO and the deployment of weapons systems posing a threat to us in close proximity to Russia's territory. We suggest that substantive talks on this topic should be started.

I would like to note in particular that we need precise, legal guarantees, because our Western colleagues have failed to deliver on verbal commitments. Specifically, everyone is aware of assurances they gave verbally that NATO would not expand to the east. But they did absolutely the opposite. In effect, Russia's legitimate security concerns were ignored and they continue to be ignored in the same manner.”⁶

The next day, in Stockholm, at a meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov announced that Russia would soon present its proposals on halting NATO's further eastward expansion. “Absolutely unacceptable”, he told the meeting, is “the

transformation of our neighbouring countries into a bridgehead for confrontation with Russia and the deployment of NATO forces in the immediate vicinity of areas of strategic importance to our security”.⁷

At a video conference with Joe Biden on 7 December, Putin again demanded reliable, legal guarantees that would halt NATO’s expansion, while the US President protested the continuing building up of Russian military forces along Ukraine’s borders.⁸

According to later claims by Putin, it was this meeting with Biden that prompted Moscow to formulate the written proposals on security guarantees presented to the United States on 17 December, and subsequently to NATO. These demanded a formal end to NATO’s expansion and restrictions on western deployments of troops and weaponry in Eastern Europe.⁹

On December 21st, Putin told an expanded meeting of his Defence Ministry’s Board that it was “extremely alarming that elements of the US global defence system are being deployed near Russia...If this infrastructure continues to move forward, and if US and NATO military systems are deployed in Ukraine, their flight time to Moscow will be only 7-10 minutes, or even five minutes for hypersonic systems”. Russia required legal guarantees, said Putin, not verbal assurances that NATO expansion would stop, because “fine words and promises” had not halted five waves of the western bloc’s eastward expansion. If western states persisted with their policies, Russia would “take appropriate military-technical measures and will have a tough response to their unfriendly steps.”¹⁰

Two days later, at his annual press conference, Putin’s ire was directed at Ukraine, accusing Kiev of creating an ‘anti-Russia’ on its territory and of contemplating military action to retake control of Donetsk and Lugansk: “Under cover of new weapons systems radicals may well decide to settle the Donbass issue, as well as the Crimean issue, by military means.”

Responding to a direct question from a foreign journalist as to whether he intended to invade Ukraine, Putin said that Russia’s actions would depend on the existence of unconditional guarantees of its security. Pressed by the same journalist on what the west didn’t understand about the Russian position, he said:

“You know, sometimes I get the feeling that we live in different worlds. They told us there would be no expansion but they expanded. They promised us equal guarantees but this equal security has failed to materialise. In 1918 an aide to President Woodrow Wilson said it would be a relief for the entire world if instead of one huge Russia, there was a separate state in Siberia and another four in Europe. In 1991 we divided ourselves into 15 but it seems even this was not enough for our partners. They believe that Russia is still too big, even after the Soviet Union

collapsed, and we were left with just 146 million people. I believe this is the only way to explain their unrelenting pressure.”

On the other hand, Putin did note the generally positive western response to the idea of discussions about Russia’s security proposals: “Our American partners are telling us that they are ready to launch this conversation by starting talks early next year in Geneva. Both sides have appointed representatives. I hope that the situation develops in this very direction.”¹¹

Failed Negotiations

During January there was some negotiating progress on arms control measures and on Russia’s demand that the rights of states to join military alliances should be balanced by the ‘indivisibility of security’ i.e. that sovereign decisions should not endanger the security of other countries. However, on January 26th the west rejected Russia’s central demand for a written guarantee that Ukraine would not join NATO.¹²

Putin was bitterly disappointed. At a joint press conference with Hungary’s Premier, Victor Orban, on February 1st, he complained that “fundamental Russian concerns” were being ignored. Asked how he would respond to this situation, Putin replied:

“Listen attentively to what I am saying. It is written into Ukraine’s doctrines that it wants to take Crimea back, by force if necessary. This is not what Ukrainian officials say in public. This is written in their documents.

Suppose Ukraine is a NATO member. It will be filled with weapons, modern offensive weapons will be deployed on its territory just like in Poland and Romania – who is going to prevent this. Suppose it starts operations in Crimea, not to mention Donbass. Crimea is sovereign Russian territory. We consider this matter settled. Imagine that Ukraine is a NATO country and starts these military operations. What are we supposed to do? Fight against the NATO bloc? Has anyone given at least some thought to this? Apparently not.”

He then claimed that

“The United States is not that concerned about Ukraine’s security. Its main goal is to contain Russia’s development. This is the whole point. In this sense, Ukraine is simply a tool to reach this goal.

This can be done in different ways: by drawing us into some armed conflict, or compelling US allies in Europe to impose tough sanctions on us...or by drawing

Ukraine into NATO, deploying attack weapons there and encouraging some Banderites to resolve the issues of Donbass or Crimea by force...

We need to find a way to ensure the interests and security of all parties to this process: Ukraine, the other European countries and Russia. But this can only be done if the documents we proposed undergo a serious, thoughtful analysis.”¹³

On February 4th, Putin travelled to Beijing for the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. While there he signed a Chinese-Russian statement on the “new era of international relations”. The document did not mention Ukraine, even in passing, but it did state:

“Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext...The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries...The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.”¹⁴

On February 7th in Moscow, Putin met French President Emmanuel Macron. The two men spoke for nearly six hours and at their follow-on press conference Putin rehearsed at length the Russian view of the roots of the current crisis: NATO expansion, Kiev’s failure to implement the Minsk agreements, NATO and the US’s aggressive character (Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria), and Ukraine’s domestic discrimination against Russian speakers. Asked point blank if he intended to invade Ukraine, Putin replied: “We are categorically opposed to NATO’s eastward expansion...It is not us moving towards NATO but NATO moving towards us.” He also reiterated the point that Ukraine’s membership of NATO was dangerous because at some point in the future it might attempt to reoccupy Crimea and the Donbass by force and thereby spark a broader Russian-Western conflict.

Asked what he would do next, Putin said that Russia would draft a response to the documents it had received from NATO and Washington. He characterised the western documents as full of ‘political clichés and proposals concerning minor issues’ but did not think the dialogue would end there.¹⁵

On February 12th, Putin spoke to Macron on the telephone and “once again drew attention to the absence of a substantive response from the United States and NATO to the Russian initiatives” and also stressed “the reluctance of the leading western powers to prompt the Kiev authorities to implement the Minsk agreements.”¹⁶

In a televised meeting with Lavrov on February 14th, Putin asked his foreign minister: “Do you think we still have a chance of coming to terms with our partners on the key problems of our concern or is this simply an attempt to drag us into an endless negotiating process with no logical conclusion?”

“I must say that there is always a chance”, replied Lavrov. “I think our opportunities are far from exhausted. Of course, [the negotiations] should not be endless, but I think we should still continue to pursue and build on them at this point.”¹⁷

The next day, Olaf Scholz, the new German Chancellor, arrived in Moscow for talks. At their joint press conference Putin said that Russia’s security proposals were a package and all the fundamental issues needed to be negotiated together. In other words, as far as he was concerned, a formal end to NATO expansion remained integral to the discussion. Asked about the Russian State Duma’s request that he recognise the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk, Putin indicated that he felt a solution within the Minsk framework was still possible, providing the French and German signatories to the agreements brought their influence to bear on Kiev.¹⁸

Lavrov handed the official Russian response to the western counter-proposals of late January to the US ambassador in Moscow on 17 February. The document warned, once again, that in the absence of legally binding security guarantees, Russia would resort to “military-technical means”.¹⁹

Was this a genuine diplomatic demarche or had Putin already taken the decision for war?

Decision for War

The final trigger for war may have been President Zelensky’s defiant speech to the Munich Security Conference on February 19th, in which he threatened Ukrainian re-acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Another crucial contingency was a significant increase in the number of ceasefire violations along the border between Donetsk and Lugansk and Kiev-controlled Ukraine. During the period 17th-21st February there were hundreds and then thousands of explosions and other ceasefire violations.²⁰ Needless to say, both sides blamed each other for the escalation. Maybe, as the Ukrainians claimed, this was a deliberate provocation by the Donbass rebels, but as David C. Hendrickson pointed out, the great majority of the shelling originated from the Ukrainian side of the ceasefire line.²¹ Whoever was responsible, it added greatly to the tension at a critical moment.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, during the 8-year (2014-2021) conflict between Kiev and the Donbass separatists there were an estimated 51,000-54,000 war-related casualties, of which 14,200-14,400 were fatalities, including at least 3,404 civilians.²²

February 21st saw Putin convene a televised meeting of the Russian Federation's Security Council to advise him how he should respond to a communist-sponsored Duma resolution calling for recognition of the independence of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. A council recommendation in favour of recognition was a foregone conclusion but the discussion was less staged and more open than the impression given by western media reporting, suggesting that while Putin himself may have already made up his mind to go to war he had yet to tell his government.

In his preliminary remarks Putin once again stressed the danger that Ukraine would eventually become a member of NATO and then stage an attack on Crimea that would draw Russia into a broader conflict with the western alliance.

Lavrov spoke first and reported that while the west had rejected Russia's major proposals and arguments, there had been some progress in talks about reducing military tensions. Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff, Dmitry Kozak, then spoke about the futility of the Minsk agreement discussions with Ukraine, France and Germany: Ukraine did not want the Donbass back on Minsk's terms of regional autonomy, and western states were more than happy for the situation to remain a 'frozen conflict'.

Alexander Bortnikov, Head of the Federal Security Service, reported on intensified Ukrainian shelling of Donetsk and Lugansk, as did Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu, who added that Ukraine had concentrated nearly 60,000 troops on its border with the two breakaway republics. Sounding the alarm about the prospects of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons, Shoigu asserted that its equipment, technology and specialist knowledge were far greater than those of Iran and North Korea. He also pointed to 'radical nationalist battalions' scattered across Ukraine and saw signs they were "preparing to deal with the Donbass issue with the use of force".

Former President, Dmitry Medvedev, made a comparison with his 2008 decision to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the short-lived Georgian-Russian war of that year. The situation today was more complicated, admitted Medvedev, but also simpler because Russia now knew that it could withstand the western sanctions that would inevitably result if it recognised Donetsk and Lugansk. In any event, Russian-Western tensions would eventually subside, and discussions about strategic security issues would resume. Medvedev even quoted the Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov's aphorism: never ask for anything, they will come to you themselves and offer everything.

In his contribution, Duma Chair, Vyacheslav Volodin, pointed out that the resolution to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk had been supported by 351 out of 450 members of parliament, while Chair of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, spoke of the unfolding “humanitarian catastrophe” in the Donbass.

The Secretary of the Council, Nikolai Patrushev, was convinced the Americans wanted to “collapse” the Russian Federation but he still favoured another summit with President Biden in order to allow one last chance to implement the Minsk agreements. In a highly revealing statement, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said that he and his government, anticipating recognition of the DPR and the LPR, had been “preparing for months” its response to possible western sanctions.

Sergey Naryshkin, the Director of Foreign Intelligence, claimed the “thesis” that Russia plans to invade Ukraine was American war propaganda designed to provoke Kiev into yet another attempt to resolve the Donbass problem by force. Nevertheless, he, too, favoured one last approach to the United States. Questioned by Putin as to whether he favoured starting a negotiating process or recognising DPR and LPR sovereignty, Naryshkin stumbled and said he favoured incorporation of the two republics into Russia but corrected himself when Putin pointed out this was not the proposal on the table.

The final council speaker was Interior Minister, Vladimir Kolokoltsev, who proposed the two republics should be recognised within the administrative boundaries they had occupied before their split from Ukraine i.e. the greater Donbass area.

At the end of the meeting Putin asked Lavrov, Shoigu and Bortnikov to state formally if they favoured recognition. All answered in the affirmative, as did Viktor Zolotov, the head of the Russian National Guard, who accused the Americans of “rushing weapons to Ukraine and trying to create nuclear arsenals that will backfire on us in the future.”²³

A few hours later a visibly troubled and emotional Putin returned to the television screen to tell his compatriots that he had decided to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk and to sign mutual assistance treaties with the two republics. His preceding address left little room for doubt that he had decided to go to war. The only question was how extensive and ambitious the military operation would be.

In analysing what appears to have been an extempore speech by Putin, some commentators have focused on the first half of the address in which he recapitulated and radicalised his previous statements on the history and nature of the Ukrainian state. Modern Ukraine, said Putin, was a creation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who had imposed arbitrary administrative borders that separated millions of Russians from their homeland and incubated a virulent Ukrainian nationalism. The Ukrainian state that emerged from the ruins of the USSR was

corrupt and oligarchic and its statehood merely a cover for the pillage and exploitation of its people, claimed Putin. Urged on by foreign states, ultra-nationalists took advantage of justified public anger and staged the 2014 Maidan coup. Under cover of patriotism the Ukrainian state was then privatised and Kiev sought to root out Russian culture and language and repress Ukraine's citizens who identified as ethnic Russians.²⁴

But perhaps a more important factor in Putin's immediate decision for war -- as opposed to its deeper origins -- was his alarmist picture of Ukraine's long-term military threat to Russia, and it was the spectre of a nuclear-armed Ukraine that loomed large:

"If Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction, the situation in the world and in Europe will drastically change, especially for us in Russia. We cannot but react to this real danger, all the more so since, let me repeat, Ukraine's western patrons may help it acquire those weapons"

According to Putin, Ukraine's *de facto* integration into NATO was already proceeding apace with the aim of establishing western military bases on Ukrainian territory. Putin noted that a number of western states were still very sceptical about Ukraine's membership of the alliance but he maintained that even if Ukraine didn't join NATO immediately it would do so in the future:

"The information we have gives us good reason to believe that Ukraine's accession to NATO and the subsequent deployment of NATO facilities has already been discussed and is only a matter of time. Given this scenario, the level of military threats to Russia will increase dramatically. At this point the risks of a sudden strike on our country will multiply."

Regarding the Donbass, Putin claimed that Kiev was trying to orchestrate a blitzkrieg against the region. Russia, said Putin, had done everything it could to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity but it was all in vain because

"Presidents and Rada deputies come and go, but deep down the aggressive and nationalistic regime in Kiev remains unchanged. It is entirely a product of the 2014 coup and those who then embarked on the path of violence, bloodshed and lawlessness did not recognise then and do not recognise now any solution to the Donbass issue other than a military one."²⁵

The next day, Putin answered questions from Russian journalists about the recognition of Donetsk and Lugansk. One questioner wanted to know if Zelensky's threat that Ukraine would re-obtain nuclear weapons was real or just talk?

Putin replied:

“We take it that these words were primarily addressed to us. I want to say that we have heard them. Ever since Soviet times, Ukraine has had fairly broad nuclear competencies, they have several nuclear power units and the nuclear industry is fairly well developed, they have dedicated schools, there is everything there to solve this issue much faster than in those countries which are solving matters from scratch...

They only lack one thing – uranium enrichment systems. But this is a matter of technology, it is not unsolvable for Ukraine, it can be remedied quite easily. As to delivery vehicles, they have old Soviet-made Tochka-U missiles with a range of 110 kilometres. This is also not a problem in view of the competencies, say, at Yuzhmash, which used to manufacture intercontinental ballistic missiles for the Soviet Union.

What is the threat to us? The appearance of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine is a strategic threat to us. Because the range can be extended from 110 kilometres to 300, to 500 – and that is it, Moscow will be in the strike zone. This is a strategic threat to us. And that is how we took it. We definitely must and will take it very seriously.”²⁶

A couple days later, on 24 February, in yet another televised address, Putin invoked a redolent historical analogy in defence of his decision to launch a pre-emptive strike against Ukraine.

In 1940 and 1941, said Putin, the Soviet Union had gone to great lengths to prevent or at least delay war with Nazi Germany. To that end the USSR had restrained its preparations to meet Hitler’s attack and when Stalin finally did heed the advice of his generals, it was too late. “The attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake which came at a high cost for our people. In the first months after hostilities broke out, we lost vast territories of strategic importance, as well as millions of lives. We will not make this mistake a second time. We have no right to do so.”²⁷

Shortly after, at a meeting with representatives of Russian business circles, Putin told the gathering:

“What is happening is a forced measure. There were simply no chances left for taking a different course of action. The security risks that had been created were so high that it was impossible to respond by other means. All attempts had come to nothing...This was a forced measure because risks could have created for us to the

extent that it would have been impossible to conceive how our country could even exist in the future.”²⁸

In making his decision for war, many diverse factors must have featured in Putin’s thinking: global and local contexts, strategic and political calculations, historical and immediate experiences of his dealings with Ukraine and the west. While his fears about the consequences of a future nuclear-armed Ukraine may have been over-stated, the unfolding public narrative indicates this was the factor that tipped the balance of his calculations in favour of invading Ukraine, despite the possible costs of doing so.

A Preventable War?

Could war have been prevented by a Russian-Western deal that halted NATO expansion and neutralised Ukraine in return for solid guarantees of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty? Quite possibly. No war is inevitable until the moment of decision. That was as true in February 2022 as it was in July 1914. A constant theme of Putin’s public discourse throughout the pre-invasion crisis was his extreme distrust of the west and the distance between their words and deeds, especially the United States. Significant western concessions in relation to Russia’s security concerns may have assuaged his most pessimistic forebodings and have persuaded him the risks of peace were lower than those of war.

More in doubt is the idea that such a deal could now become the basis for a ceasefire and a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. War transforms perceptions and radicalises strategic-political goals. Such was the case with Germany during the First World War. Ukraine’s battling defiance and the west’s intransigence in face of his blatantly aggressive war can only have reinforced Putin’s narrative that Russia is engaged in an existential struggle with NATO and the United States. Given the enormous costs of the war, he is unlikely to settle for less than significant territorial gains as well complete gratification of his security demands.

If there is a glimmer of hope, it is that Putin’s words indicate the war’s primary purpose is geopolitical – to safeguard Russia against a perceived nuclear-armed Ukraine-NATO threat. A grand bargain and genuine compromise to radically restructure Russia’s relations with Ukraine and the west might be enough to deflect him from pursuing a prolonged confrontation and struggle with NATO – a conflict that could prove far more dangerous and devastating than the Soviet-Western cold war.

¹ For example, Michael Brendan Dougherty:

https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/russia-has-collected-wins-war-would-mean-loss/?utm_source=recirc-desktop&utm_medium=homepage&utm_campaign=right-rail&utm_content=corner&utm_term=first. I circulated this piece to my contacts with the tagline: ‘Russia-Ukraine war danger – an optimistic view’. To be fair, Dougherty’s piece was published before the issue of Ukraine acquiring nuclear weapons became part of the crisis,

² ‘Now or never’ was what the Kaiser scribbled on a report from his ambassador in Vienna. See further: M. Trachtenberg, “The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment” in his *History & Strategy*, Princeton UP 1991.

³ ‘End the Invasion of Ukraine Now! Appeal from Russian studies scholars’:

[https://www.change.org/p/academics-end-the-invasion-of-ukraine-now-appeal-by-russian-studies-specialists?utm_content=cl_sharecopy_32548172_en-GB%3A4&recruiter=1255912202&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copypink&utm_campaign=share_petition](https://www.change.org/p/academics-end-the-invasion-of-ukraine-now-appeal-by-russian-studies-specialists?utm_content=cl_sharecopy_32548172_en_GB%3A4&recruiter=1255912202&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copypink&utm_campaign=share_petition).

⁴ The narrative that follows is commensurate with the more analytical approach to the war’s origins taken by Richard Sakwa, “The March of Folly Resumed: Russia, Ukraine and the West”, <https://prruk.org/the-march-of-foolly-resumed-russia-ukraine-and-the-west/> and Nicholai Petro. “A True Solution to the Tragedy of Ukraine”, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/true-solution-tragedy-ukraine-201302>.

⁵ Expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board, 18 November 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67123>. All the quotations from Putin’s speeches and statements derive from the documents published on the English-language version of his presidential website, checked against the Russian originals for the purpose of streamlining some of the translations.

⁶ Ceremony for presenting foreign ambassadors’ letters of credence, 1 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67250>.

⁷ Statement by Mr Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the 28th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Stockholm, 2 December 2021, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/c/506840.pdf>.

⁸ Meeting with President Joseph Biden, 7 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67315>.

⁹ [Draft] Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees”, 17 December, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en&TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817a

[b200089e5e1b97d09c2606ac7850ae1cbb5fe885e3cc9ee1d8ce3fac453c388b7c2ee086f1d522914300058f6a40cd82867c5bf2f3693a329e30181da4157d655f5ba298424da863cd3ba13d62ba95585bce2eba65cdd5e7a57a6693a329e30181da4157d655f5ba298424da863cd3ba13d62ba95585bce2eba65cdd5e7a57a6.](https://www.kremlin.ru/foreign/press-service/minister-speeches/1798349)

¹⁰ Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, 21 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67402>.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin's annual news conference, 23 December 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>.

¹² <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-delivers-written-reply-to-russia-on-security-demands/>

¹³ News conference following Russian-Hungarian talks, 1 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67690>.

¹⁴ Chinese-Russian statement, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

¹⁵ News conference following Russian-French talks, 8 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67735>.

¹⁶ Telephone conversation with President of France Emmanuel Macron, 12 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67759>.

¹⁷ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's working meeting with President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, 14 February 14, 2022. https://mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1798349/.

¹⁸ News conference following Russian-German talks, 15 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67774>.

¹⁹ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/17/russia-will-be-forced-to-respond-if-us-does-not-engage-on-security-demands-a76439>.

²⁰ [https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports/?filters=+ds_date:\(\[2022-02-01T00:00:00Z%20TO%202022-02-23T00:00:00Z\]\)&solrsort=score%20desc&rows=10](https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports/?filters=+ds_date:([2022-02-01T00:00:00Z%20TO%202022-02-23T00:00:00Z])&solrsort=score%20desc&rows=10).

²¹ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-tensions-ukraine-boil-over-200725>.

²² https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf. In general, see D.R. Marples (ed), *The War in Ukraine's Donbas*, CEU Press 2022.

²³ Security Council meeting, 21 February 2022,
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67825>.

²⁴ Marlene Laruelle & Ivan Grek, “Decoding Putin’s Speeches: The Three Ideological Lines of Russia’s Military Intervention in Ukraine”,
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²⁵ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 21 February 2022,
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²⁶ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67838>.

²⁷ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 24 February 2022,
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

²⁸ Meeting with representatives of Russian business circles, 24 February 2022.
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67846>.