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Is Putin Bluffing on Redlines? Ask Putin.

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*On June 13, Russian **President Vladimir Putin** met with war correspondents and military bloggers for a question and answer session at the Kremlin. One war correspondent asked Putin "a question about the notorious red lines." Addressing Putin, he said,*

> "Clearly . . . we are at war not just with the Kiev regime, but with the so-called collective West as well. NATO countries are constantly moving and crossing our red lines. We express our concern and keep saying that this is unacceptable, but never come up with actual answers. Are we going to keep moving our red lines?"

That is a question top officials in the Biden administration have been asking as well. Less than two weeks earlier, *The Washington Post* reported that the risk calculation has begun to factor in that Putin "has not followed through on promises to punish the West for providing weapons to Ukraine." The White House has concluded that Putin is "bluffing."

A senior State Department official says that "Russia's reluctance to retaliate has influenced the risk calculus of **Secretary of State Antony Blinken**," who has pushed the Biden administration "to do more to support Ukraine." A White House official told the *Post* that "national security adviser **Jake Sullivan** also has viewed the benefits of supplying more lethal weaponry to Ukraine as outweighing the risks of escalation," leading him to work "extensively with European allies on providing F-16s to Ukraine."

But the US may be misinterpreting Russian military decisions and not recognizing them as escalatory responses to the crossing of redlines.

Those who know Putin's thinking best say he does not bluff. In his biography, *Putin*, Philip Short says that a formative lesson of Putin's childhood was never bluff. Short says that the lesson Putin learned in the KGB had already been learned on the streets. In the KGB, Putin was taught not to "reach for a weapon unless you are prepared to use it." As a child, Putin says, he had learned that "It was the same on the street. [There] relations were clarified with fists. You didn't get involved unless you were prepared to see it through."

> "NATO countries are constantly . . . crossing our redlines," the war correspondent said. "We express our concern and keep saying that this is unacceptable, but never come up with actual answers. Are we going to keep moving our red lines?" he asked.

We have responded to them crossing our redlines, Putin answered. He specifically identified three responses to the crossing of Russian redlines.

The "first and the most important," Putin said was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the first place.

"[T]he brightest of all redlines" for Russia, as then ambassador to Russia and now director of the CIA **William Burns** called it, has always been "Ukrainian entry into NATO." On December 17, 2021, Russia, once again, highlighted that redline for Washington. The key demands of the proposals on security guarantees were no NATO expansion into Ukraine and no deployment of weapons or troops to Ukraine. On December 26, the US rejected Russia's essential demand for a written guarantee that Ukraine would not join NATO. Putin noted "that fundamental Russian concerns were ignored," and, on February 17, the official Russian response said that the US and NATO offered "no constructive answer" to Russia's key demands. It then added that if the US and NATO continued to refuse to provide Russia with "legally binding guarantees" regarding its security concerns, Russia would respond with "military-technical means."

That was not a bluff. Russia drew the redline. The US crossed the redline. Putin said Russia would respond with military means. One week later, they invaded Ukraine. "Is the special military operation itself not a response to them crossing these lines?" Putin responded to the war correspondent. "Is this not the answer to their crossing the red lines?"

The second Russian response to the West's crossing of Russian redlines was the striking of Ukraine's energy system. In the early days of the war, Russia seems not to have deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure. A senior analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency leaked to *Newsweek* that, in the first month of the war, "almost all of the long-range strikes have been aimed at military targets."

In September, 2022, Russia witnessed "US military personnel" being "directly involved . . . in critical line functions" in the recent Ukrainian counteroffensive. On September 10, the *New York Times* reported that the US was "provid[ing] better and more relevant information about Russian weaknesses" and that they had "stepped up feeds of intelligence about the position of Russian forces, highlighting weaknesses in the Russian lines." CNN reported that the US was now engage in "war-gaming" with Ukraine.

Russia interpreted this escalated involvement in the war as indicating that the US was now "directly participating in the military actions against our country." And that crossed the second redline. The Russian response was the first massive air strikes on electrical systems.

That the Ukrainian offensive "directly involved US military personnel in critical line functions . . . crossed what certainly may be seen by the Russian leadership as a red line announced at the very outset of the Russian action in Ukraine," *Asia Times* reported on September 12.

> "Are strikes on Ukraine's energy system not an answer to them crossing the red lines?" Putin asked the war correspondent.

The third Russian response came after a series of Ukrainian drone strikes inside Russian

territory, highlighted especially by the drones that Russia was forced to explode over the Kremlin, and a blunt admission of "plans to assassinate President Putin." Russia responded with missile strikes that destroyed Ukrainian Defense Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate just outside Kiev.

> "And the destruction of the headquarters of the main intelligence directorate of the armed forces of Ukraine outside Kiev, almost within Kiev's city limits, is it not the answer? It is," Putin said to the question of answering the crossing of redlines.

You never know you have crossed a redline until you have already crossed it. That makes the choice of escalation over diplomacy very dangerous. But you also never know a country has answered the crossing of a redline unless you recognize their escalations as answers to the crossing of redlines. Putin publicly identified three Russian escalations as responses to the West crossing Russian redlines. He also suggested there may have been more escalations that might not have happened but for the crossing of redlines: "not everything may be covered by the media," Putin said.

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