

# Putin's Brave New World: Russia's Objectives in Ukraine, and What They Mean for the West

A diplomatic solution is the only real solution to the situation in Ukraine

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*Today, the dangers of military escalation are beyond description.*

*What is now happening in Ukraine has serious geopolitical implications. It could lead us into a World War III Scenario.*

*It is important that a peace process be initiated with a view to preventing escalation.*

*Global Research does not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

*The history of this war must be understood.*

*The bombing and shelling led by Ukraine's Armed Forces directed against the people of Donbass started eight years ago, resulting in the destruction of residential areas and more than 10,000 civilian casualties.*

*A bilateral Peace Agreement is required.*

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*Little is yet known about why Russian President Vladimir Putin initiated the special military operation in Ukraine when he did, and it seems that many pundits are also yet reluctant to risk their reputations by speculating about the potential objectives of a political leader who is viewed by many as one of the most cunning and effective strategists of the 21st century. After all, who can really claim to know what Putin is planning?*

The March 3rd phone call between Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron saw a continuation of Putin's limited statements thus far regarding his objectives, with Putin telling

Macron that Russia would “achieve the goals of its military intervention in Ukraine whatever happens”. According to a reported statement released by the Kremlin following the phone call [1]:

“Vladimir Putin outlined in detail the fundamental approaches and conditions in the context of negotiations with representatives of Kyiv. It was confirmed that, first of all, we are talking about the demilitarisation and neutral status of Ukraine, so that a threat to the Russian Federation will never emanate from its territory.”

As Putin seeks to outwardly frame the military intervention as justified self-defense, with the Kremlin stating that Russia needs to ensure that Ukraine is prevented from posing an ongoing threat to Russia and her people, many experts doubt that Putin actually views the much smaller and far less well-equipped Ukraine as an actual threat to national security, despite the ongoing clashes in Donbas since 2014. The sheer scale of Putin’s special military operation, and its territorial gains thus far, hint at greater ambitions.

Far more likely is that Putin, who turns 70 later this year, has recognized that his time is running short to cement his legacy as the greatest leader in Russian history.

Putin has never hid his admiration of the Soviet Union’s former glory and the influence wielded by that former superpower, and it has become clear in recent years that Putin is seeking to restore Russia to its rightful status on the world stage.

While Russia has always exerted influence in the near abroad, concrete steps were taken by Russia to solidify its ascension toward superpower status by expanding its territorial limits in Europe, first following the conflict in Crimea in 2014, and then following the disputed election in Belarus in 2020.

Ukraine’s legitimacy as a nation and the sovereignty it was granted at the dissolution of the Soviet Union has long been contested by Putin, so bringing Ukraine’s territory and people back into the fold as part of an expanded confederation within the Union State (currently comprising Russia and Belarus) would effectively ensure that Russia can reestablish its European borders to where they essentially existed at the height of the U.S.S.R’s glory. This would not only thwart further EU and NATO expansion eastward (the real threat to Russia’s security), it would also allow Putin to undo what some Russians view as an historical injustice. As such, many analysts speculate that the eventual goal of the special military operation is to return Ukraine to Russia by deposing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and putting in place a new government that would be cooperative with Russia.

It is not clear if Russia’s military anticipated the fierce resistance it has met thus far from Ukrainian forces and from the civilian volunteers and foreign fighters supporting them.

What is clear is that, due to Russia’s incredible military superiority and NATO’s very clear stance of non-interference, there is a risk of bloodshed on a massive scale if Russia’s armed forces unleash their full potential. If Putin does truly wish to establish closer ties with Ukraine and its people, it might seem counterintuitive to reduce the country to rubble first.

However, it is unlikely that Russia would succeed in effecting regime change in Kyiv without a dramatic escalation of violence, which certainly would not make the average Ukrainian more sympathetic towards Russia. Putin will need to find the right balance.

If we consider that Russia’s borders will inevitably be redrawn following the military

intervention, and sections of what are currently modern-day Ukraine will reside within those new borders, it would perhaps seem more realistic to expect that Putin does not intend to “occupy” all of Ukraine.

It would instead appear more likely that Putin will seek to restore the Russian status of what he has indicated are “historically Russian lands” in New Russia (primarily in the south and east of the country), thus creating a much needed land bridge to Crimea. This would then allow Putin to demonstrate that his intent has never been to “occupy” Ukraine or to eliminate the concept of Ukrainian nationhood, as the Western part of the country could remain outside of the Kremlin’s control, potentially with the western city of Lviv as its potential capital.

This reduced Ukrainian state, along with Moldova (another former Soviet Republic), could then form something of a buffer between Russia and NATO members Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. From the perspective of military strategy, this might also make sense, as a prolonged campaign in western Ukraine could present additional logistical challenges for Russia; for example, maintaining supply lines for ground forces over ever-increasing distances will be difficult, as will be getting troops and equipment across the Dnieper River, which forms an important barrier limiting Russia’s ability to project their logistics chain westward. In addition, securing the logistics chain from the ever-present risk of insurgent attacks in occupied territories will become more difficult to contend with the further Russian troops move away from supply hubs in the east.

Another possibility is that Putin does not actually have major territorial ambitions, but is using this intervention as exactly what he is calling it – a special military operation, which clearly implies that the activities would be limited in scope.

As of March 4th, there has been a marked shift in President Zelenskyy’s tone, his frustration and dismay with the EU and NATO apparent. With NATO unambiguously stating that it will not intervene militarily so long as NATO countries are not attacked, not even to enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine (fearing this would lead to full-fledged war in Europe), Zelenskyy told NATO in a video released March 4th that

“All the people who die from this day forward will also die because of you, because of your weakness, because of your lack of unity”, adding “Today, the leadership of the alliance gave the green light for further bombing of Ukrainian cities and villages, having refused to set up a no-fly zone” [2].

Should this sentiment become further entrenched amongst the Ukrainian political leadership and intelligentsia, and if it is indeed genuine and not merely posturing on Zelenskyy’s part (for example, in the hopes that it might shame NATO into taking action), it risks pushing Ukraine further away from eventually joining the EU and NATO.

The Ukrainian people may well conclude that they are alone in their struggles, and that the EU and NATO abandoned them when Ukraine needed them the most. This can occur despite aggression from Russia; Ukraine does not necessarily need to become closer to Russia in order to move further away from the EU and NATO.

Estrangement from the EU and NATO could then create conditions allowing Putin to return to the negotiating table from a position of power, which could in turn permit him to pull back his military knowing that he has succeeded in quashing Ukraine’s ambitions to join these

Western alliances, establishing what he has long hoped would be a neutralized Ukraine devoid of any short term threat to Russia, while only holding onto relatively small portions of Ukraine's current territory in the east and south.

This potential strategy might also explain why Russia's military has proceeded at what might seem like a glacial pace thus far, where it's well known that Russia could have likely battered Ukraine into submission by now, had it truly wanted to. This strategy also aligns with Russia's well-known practice of sowing discord, supported by effective propaganda, within an adversary population; by turning the hearts and minds of Ukrainians against the EU and NATO, Putin accomplishes his goal using what would only really amount to a show of strength, thus minimizing bloodshed and not risking another Euromaidan by ruling as occupiers or via a pro-Russian proxy government over a people resolved to repel Russian influence.

Also possible is Putin's strategy may backfire, and he may well exacerbate what is already a difficult relationship with Ukraine, where Ukrainian disappointment in NATO's non-intervention might be relatively short-lived, and this military initiative may only further reinforce to Ukrainians their need to work towards the reforms required for them to join the EU and NATO in order to guarantee that Russia is unwilling to take military action again in the future.

Russia's actions in Ukraine have drawn the ire of the international community, which has been swift in its condemnation of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. The almost daily imposition of new sanctions is already impacting Russia's economy.

On March 1st, France's Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire declared an "all-out economic and financial war on Russia" [3], which demonstrates that the EU and its allies are choosing to use sanctions as their weapons since they are unwilling to use conventional ones.

Major corporations are ceasing operations in Russia, including behemoths like Visa and MasterCard. Scores of western airlines are refusing to operate in Russia, and countries have closed their airspace to Russian planes.

Even famously neutral Switzerland is moving in lockstep with the European bloc, approving sanctions against Russia in a dramatic departure from its typical isolationist stance. And in one of the few places where Russia and western nations typically play nice, the Arctic Council, Russia is being isolated, with the other member states indicating on March 3rd that they won't participate in the work of the Arctic Council, or attend any of its meetings, until further notice.

What does this mean for Russia and its people?

For one, Russia will be further isolated, and the lives of everyday Russians will only get harder. There are historical lessons to learn about similar tactics employed against such countries as North Korea and Iran, where the people in those countries suffer greatly due to economic sanctions, and their governments nevertheless continue their quest to develop nuclear capabilities unabated.

And without being overly alarmist, it is worth reminding readers that the current isolationism and crippling sanctions being imposed on Russia is not dissimilar to the severe reparations imposed on Germany post-WWI, which many historians have concluded played a role in the

rise in German nationalism that acted as a catalyst for the political events that eventually led to WWII. Will these sanctions – which are likely to impact the average Russian citizen far more than the Russian government and allied oligarchs that are being targeted – cause Russians to turn against the government en masse in a series of ever-growing protests; or, will they more likely result in Russians feeling unfairly targeted by the West, which can then give rise to a renewed Russian nationalist movement, which may in turn further embolden the Russian government?

Another factor to consider is how the Western response to Russia's special military operation might shape geopolitics in the longer term.

It seems likely that these sanctions will result in a further rapprochement between Russia and China, since many markets will now be closed to Russian imports and exports, and China's economic ambitions could marry well with Russia's newfound need for willing trading partners. China could, for example, provide economic support through new infrastructure projects in Russia, perhaps to further some of its Belt and Road Initiative ambitions.

China may also provide political support for Russia's claims in Ukraine, as there are parallels with China's claims in relation to Taiwan. However, China may well be too wary of drawing the ire of Western nations, and the potential consequences for its own economy, which could force Russia to develop new trade agreements and alliances with less scrupulous partners who might see an opportunity to better their own lots due to Russia's perceived disadvantage.

So what does all of this spell out for the West?

In short, the EU and NATO are forced to contend with a country whose nuclear arsenal has been placed at high alert while seeking to take concrete actions that may or may not be perceived as an act of aggression – or even worse, an act of war – by a leader whose ambitions are unclear.

On March 5th, Putin warned that the economic sanctions being levied against Russia are “akin to an act of war” – how would he perceive NATO warplanes patrolling Ukrainian airspace? It appears that NATO is unwilling to find out for sure.

Without knowing what Putin specifically seeks to accomplish in Ukraine, the West is once again left in a position where it must react to Putin's actions while trying to convince Russian negotiators to come back to the table in earnest.

While Russian and Ukrainian delegations continue important negotiations surrounding ceasefires and securing safe passage for refugees, western political leaders must keep lines of communication with the Russian leadership open in order to find a resolution to the current crisis.

The West needs to keep Putin talking, as Macron attempted, in order to develop an effective strategy for convincing Putin to put an end to his special military operation; if Putin decides that he's done talking, perhaps because Russia will have essentially been made into a pariah state, there will be no hope left for a resolution.

A diplomatic solution is the only real solution to the situation in Ukraine, so the EU and NATO must figure out what Putin truly seeks to accomplish (by whatever means necessary) in

order to attempt to meet him halfway. Right now, Putin has the upper hand, and it's hard to imagine that banning a few Russian oligarchs from visiting Switzerland is really going to change Putin's mind about anything.

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## Notes

1. Oatis, Jonathan, editor. "Putin tells Macron Russia will achieve its goals in Ukraine". Reuters, 3 Mar 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-tells-macron-russia-will-achieve-its-goals-ukraine-2022-03-03/>.
2. "NATO rejects no-fly zone; Ukraine slams 'greenlight for bombs'". Al Jazeera, 5 Mar 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/5/nato-rejects-no-fly-zone-ukraine-decries-greenlight-for-bombs>.
3. Lough, Richard. "French minister declares economic 'war' on Russia, and then beats a retreat". Reuters, 1 Mar 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-declares-economic-war-against-russia-2022-03-01/>.

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