

The world after the war in Ukraine: Who or what will stop Putin?

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We cannot seem to believe the raw, extreme realism by which Russia's Vladimir Putin is acting against Ukraine. Raw realism is so abominable to American thinking that we would rather believe he is crazy.

Yet raw realism is what we are seeing in Ukraine: Putin has the might, so he is intent on making the right. He is sure that the West will not intervene militarily, which is not hard to conclude since the U.S. position has been stated, publicly, multiple times. He has made Russia resistant to sanctions in the near term and concluded that, by the time sanctions take full effect, Ukraine will be his. Further, he has judged that Europe is too dependent on Moscow to continue sanctions in the long term. Putin also knows that once force is used, only an equal or greater force will stop him. He knows that sanctions alone are not that equal-or-greater force. He has already escalated his use of force in Ukraine — and has very publicly put his nuclear deterrent forces on high alert — until he gets what he wants, because he's convinced he can.

Like other raw realists, Putin has no intention of stopping with Ukraine. He'll wait for the right conditions, or, better stated, he'll work directly to create the right conditions elsewhere so that he can execute another "special military operation" after being "invited" to assist some future fig-leaf entity. Raw realists such as Putin take what they can, when they can, until someone stops them.

Putin has been working to replace the post-World War II, rules-based order for a long time. He made that clear 15 years ago at the Munich Security Conference. He began by falsely accusing Georgia of aggression to "justify" his August 2008 invasion of that country. He backed Ukraine's Donbas separatists, who he helped generate, and then annexed Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014. He also has been hard at work eroding Western democracies, trying to create a gap between the U.S. and Europe, trying to weaken NATO, rebuilding the Russian military and honing it in several operational areas, launching cyberattacks, and now brazenly and illegally invading a sovereign country. Putin's idea of a replacement to the post-World War II world order is playing out before our eyes. But will we believe it?

We didn't believe the reality before us when, on Aug. 23, 1996, Osama bin Laden [published a declaration of war](#) on the United States; we dismissed him and his declaration, believing it was meaningless because it came from a "thug," "a terrorist hiding in a cave." The [bombing](#) of two U.S. embassies in 1988, the [failed attack](#) on the USS The Sullivans, and the [successful attack](#) on the USS Cole, were insufficient to change the American position. Only the [attacks of Sept. 11, 2001](#), convinced American political leaders to take al Qaeda seriously.

We must not repeat this error with Putin.

Everyone hopes that Ukrainian resistance supported by U.S. and NATO military arms and equipment will be enough to stop Putin. But the sad reality is that Ukraine may be lost because, unless conditions change drastically, the U.S. and NATO won't reverse their policy of no direct military support. That, of course, would risk a wider war — a risk Putin believes the West will not take. This reality is tragic for the people of Ukraine, a moral blow to what the West stands for, an insult to the political and military leaders who worked so hard to establish the order from which we and our allies have benefited so long, and an affront to the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines whose sacrifices created the opportunity for those leaders.

As we watch the Russian bear devour an innocent country, the question now is what can the U.S. do next?

Concerning the trans-Atlantic alliance: Can the U.S. send military supplies to Ukraine and temporary reinforcements to Europe faster, and to more locations? When will the U.S. start discussions within NATO about a new, permanent force posture in Europe? Will the U.S. encourage other NATO nations to follow [Germany's lead](#) by increasing defense spending? What portions of the [NATO Charter](#) or other governing documents should be modified to fit current realities? How will the U.S. and Europe work together to reinforce their economies so that they can weather the sanctions imposed on Russia and become stronger as a whole?

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Concerning the broader strategic environment: What are the necessary diplomatic and informational actions that the U.S. must lead to prevent what some are already calling "a new normal" from becoming normal? How will the leaders of the West and our allies across the globe adapt to the multiple post-World War II organizations that make up the rules-based order? Will the U.S. try to re-engage China based upon Putin's raw aggression? Will the U.S. lead an effort in the U.N. to challenge the legitimacy of a criminal aggressor, Russia, having a seat on the Security Council?

These and other questions won't be asked or answered if we fail to see the reality unfolding before our eyes and understand its broader implications. To say "No one wants war" is to miss the obvious: Putin does. He has launched an aggressive war, and he won't stop by himself or by sanctions alone. This is not the kind of world order conducive to American prosperity, or anyone else's. To focus too narrowly on the Ukraine crisis misses the opportunity to address the larger geopolitical challenges that Ukraine represents.

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