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FORECAST SERIES: Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine

PUTIN'S MILITARY OPTIONS



FREDERICK W. KAGAN, NATALIYA BUGAYOVA, GEORGE BARROS,
KATERYNA STEPANENKO, AND MASON CLARK



The background of the entire page is a detailed topographic map of a region, likely in Eastern Europe, showing intricate contour lines and geographical features. The map is rendered in a light, muted brown color, providing a textured and thematic backdrop for the text.

Frederick W. Kagan, Nataliya Bugayova, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Mason Clark

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Cover: Peaceful Mission 2021 joint counterterrorism exercise by SCO member states

ORENBURG REGION, RUSSIA SEPTEMBER 23, 2021: T-72B3M tanks are seen during the Peaceful Mission 2021 joint counterterrorism command post exercise by SCO member states at the Donguz military training ground. Gavriil Grigorov/TASS (Photo by Gavriil Grigorov\TASS via Getty Images)

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PUTIN'S MILITARY OPTIONS

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Executive Summary

Russian President Vladimir Putin is amassing a large force near the Ukrainian border and reportedly has a military plan to invade and conquer most of unoccupied Ukraine. Western leaders are rightly taking the threat of such an invasion very seriously, and we cannot dismiss the possibility that Putin will order his military to execute it. However, the close look at what such an invasion would entail presented in this report and the risks and costs Putin would have to accept in ordering it leads us to forecast that he is very unlikely to launch an invasion of unoccupied Ukraine this winter. Putin is much more likely to send Russian forces into Belarus and possibly overtly into Russian-occupied Donbas. He might launch a limited incursion into unoccupied southeastern Ukraine that falls short of a full-scale invasion.

A full-scale Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine would be by far the largest, boldest, and riskiest military operation Moscow has launched since the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. It would be far more complex than the US wars against Iraq in 1991 or 2003. It would be a marked departure from the approaches Putin has relied on since 2015, and a major step-change in his willingness to use Russian conventional military power overtly. It would cost Russia enormous sums of money and likely many thousands of casualties and destroyed vehicles and aircraft. Even in victory, such an invasion would impose on Russian President Vladimir Putin the requirement to reconstruct Ukraine and then establish a new government and security forces there more suitable for his objectives.

We continue to assess for all these reasons that Putin does not, in fact, intend to invade unoccupied Ukraine this winter despite the continued build-up of Russian forces in preparation to do so.

A full-scale Russian invasion would consist of numerous discrete operations, almost every one of which could also be conducted independently of the others to achieve more limited objectives at lesser cost and risk. The most salient of those operations include, in order from most- to least-likely:

- Deploying Russian airborne and/or mechanized units to one or more locations in Belarus that would support a planned attack on Ukraine as well as pose other threats to NATO member states;
- Deploying Russian mechanized, tank, artillery, and support units overtly into occupied Donbas;
- Breaking out from occupied Donbas to establish a land bridge connecting Russian-occupied

Crimea with Russian territory near Rostov along the northern Sea of Azov littoral, as well as seizing the Kherson region north of Crimea and securing the Dnepr-Crimea canal;

- Conducting airborne and amphibious operations to seize Odesa and the western Ukrainian Black Sea coast; and
- Launching a mechanized drive to seize the strategic city of Kharkiv in northeastern Ukraine.

Putin will very likely deploy Russian troops into Belarus this winter. He has set all the necessary informational and military conditions to do so and is likely simply waiting for what he judges to be the right moment. Such a move could dramatically increase the challenge NATO faces defending the Baltic States from future Russian attack because it would put Russian mechanized units on both sides of the narrow Suwalki Corridor through which NATO supplies and reinforcements to the Baltic States must run. It would also set conditions for future threats to invade Ukraine along an axis that would enable Russian troops to envelop Kyiv from the west. And it would put additional Russian troops on the Polish border, increasing the threat to NATO's eastern flank.

Putin and Russian officials are actively setting informational conditions to move Russian troops overtly into occupied Donbas. Russian forces are already covertly there, to be sure. An overt deployment would let Putin bring in much more combat power that would pose a more immediate and serious threat to unoccupied Ukraine. Military conditions are likely already set both in occupied Donbas and among the troops that would deploy there. Putin need not fear unrest in occupied Donbas because of its pro-Russian sentiments and

the firm control he has established over it through his proxies and agents. The overt deployment of Russian forces there would put great domestic pressure on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky from two directions. Anti-Russian Ukrainians and the Ukrainian military would demand a response and serious preparations to defend against a possible Russian attack. Western leaders would likely press Zelensky not to respond so as to avoid “escalating” the conflict or disrupting diplomatic efforts underway to de-escalate it. These pressures could set conditions for what we assess to be Putin’s preferred course of action, which focuses on undermining Zelensky and the current Ukrainian political environment in advance of Ukrainian parliamentary and presidential elections in 2023 and 2024 respectively. We will explore this preferred course of action in the next report in this series. Such efforts would also make a future Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine somewhat easier than it is at present.

All other Russian military options involve attacking one or more areas of unoccupied Ukraine and would therefore constitute renewed overt Russian aggression not seen since 2014–2015. These military operations would create tremendous pressure on Zelensky and the Ukrainian military, confront NATO and the United States with very unpleasant and difficult choices, and set conditions for future Russian military operations against Ukraine. They would also pose serious risks to Putin, however. They would certainly generate Russian casualties and cause losses of expensive equipment that Russia can ill-afford to replace. Putin might nevertheless accept these risks and costs in individual limited attacks, particularly those that offer him reliable ways to stop his advances and declare victory early on if things appear likely to go poorly for him.

The operation to establish a land bridge from Rostov to Crimea is likely the most attractive to Putin in this respect. It solves a real problem for him by giving him control of the Dnepr-Crimea canal, which he badly needs to get fresh water to occupied Crimea. It would do fearful damage to the Ukrainian economy by disrupting key transportation routes from eastern Ukraine to the west. He could halt operations upon obtaining an important gain, such as seizing the canal and the area around it or after taking the strategic city of Mariupol just beyond the boundary of occupied Donbas.

The other two possible courses of action are much more dangerous and much less susceptible to early termination. With regard to the seizure of Odesa, amphibious and airborne attacks are inherently risky, no matter how well-rehearsed and prepared. The drive on Kharkiv minimizes those risks but imposes the very real challenge of seizing and holding a city of more than 1.5 million people. We assess that Putin is unlikely to conduct either of these courses of action independently of a full-scale invasion.

Putin will surely continue to build up the capabilities he would need to conduct the full-scale invasion of Ukraine over the course of this winter. He gains tremendous leverage with the West in doing so and allows his military time to set conditions for a much more rapid build-up and attack against Ukraine or NATO states in the future, since we forecast he will likely leave elements of his mobilized forces in place at the end of this crisis.

The continued military deployments themselves are not, therefore, the indicators we should be watching to determine Putin’s intent. We should instead be watching the information conditions he is setting in Ukraine, Russia, and the West, as discussed in Part I of this series. If Putin is serious about seizing all or most of unoccupied Ukraine, he will be setting conditions for the post-war governance of that area as well. Western and Ukrainian intelligence should focus on indicators that he is doing so, many of which will be hard to observe in the open source.

The art of deterring Putin lies in adding sufficient risk to his undertakings while offering the most limited possible negotiated concessions. Western negotiators and policymakers must internalize the extreme risks and costs to Russia that are inherent in a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to avoid conceding to or threatening Russia more than is needed to deter an attack Putin probably does not intend to launch.

Putin is trying to panic the West into surrendering important principles and accepting Russian actions that would damage Western interests and security severely but would seem less dangerous when compared to the massive threat Putin is presenting to Ukraine. Western leaders must avoid becoming mesmerized by the threat of a Russian invasion while cajoling Putin to de-escalate the crisis he has created.

Introduction

The Russian military is clearly creating the option to invade Ukraine along multiple axes simultaneously and reportedly has a plan to do so later this winter. We assess that Russian President Vladimir Putin will not execute that plan, is highly unlikely to conduct a full-scale invasion of unoccupied Ukraine, and may not use Russian military force beyond occupied Donbas and Belarus at all. We assess that he would not have executed the leaked plan and that a full-scale invasion of unoccupied Ukraine was highly unlikely even before the summit with US President Joe Biden. We assess that Putin is far more likely to use the threat of massive invasion that Russian deployments, mobilization, and reported plans have created to advance ongoing Russian lines of effort in Ukraine while extracting concessions from the West furthering those efforts and other Russian objectives. The presidential summit and the ensuing diplomatic process thus further advance Putin's original objectives, reinforcing his preferred course of action rather than preventing an invasion.

This part of our report examines the manner in which a full-scale invasion might proceed based on observed and projected Russian military movements; our assessments of Putin's objectives and the situations in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the West as considered in Part I; and reports of the intercepted

Russian plan leaked in Western media.¹ It considers the challenges that Putin and the Russian military would likely face in executing such a plan during the military operations themselves and following the end of major combat operations.

Those challenges are daunting, and Putin and Russian military planners are very likely aware of them; they should profoundly shape Western policy during this crisis. The art of deterring aggression lies in tipping the balance of expected risk, cost, and reward so that the aggressor decides that the undertaking is not worth the cost or is too risky. Western leaders must understand the risks and costs inherent in a military undertaking of this scale in order to determine how much they must add to tip the scale—and thereby avoid conceding or threatening more than is necessary.

This report also considers in detail various sub-components of the overall invasion plan to evaluate the likelihood that Putin might execute one or more of those components without committing to a full invasion. All these sub-components could set conditions for a full-scale invasion in the future, but each also achieves important Russian objectives in its own right.

Full-Scale Invasion

The Russian Plan

Numerous media stories have presented summaries, sometimes detailed, of the plan for the invasion that US intelligence reportedly obtained clandestinely.² The plan is straightforward as presented: Russian forces based in Crimea and Donbas begin attacks on southern Ukraine, likely with the intention of drawing Ukrainian forces there. Russian mechanized forces then strike toward and encircle key cities such as Kharkiv, Dnipro, and Kyiv. One

report in German media suggests that the Russians intend to cut off power and other essential services to those surrounded cities to force their capitulation within a few weeks.³ Most reports of the plan depict Russian forces stopping largely along the line of the Dnepr River, with two notable exceptions—the Russians apparently plan also to seize Odesa and the entire western Ukrainian coastline, and they reportedly aim to encircle Kyiv from the west and seize it as well.⁴ Reports of this plan along

with commentary by Russian analysts (who are not necessarily well placed to have good insight into the plan, however) suggest that Putin might not attempt to conquer western Ukraine—where anti-Russian sentiment is highest and a large-scale insurgency is most likely to result from an invasion.⁵

The bulk of the invading force would be Russian forces already stationed at permanent garrisons in Crimea; forces around Rostov and in Donbas; forces from bases in Boguchar, Valuiky, and Klinty along the northern Ukrainian border; and airborne troops that can rapidly deploy from many bases in Russia at short notice.⁶ Many of these units are likely not fully manned in peacetime, as the Russian military still relies on conscription to fill out its ranks.⁷ The US intelligence community reportedly assesses that Putin has ordered a call-up of 100,000 reservists, presumably to fill out these and possibly other units that would be needed for the invasion.⁸

The seizure of Kyiv poses the most significant military challenge in this plan. Most of the city, including the presidential palace and Parliament, is on the right bank (the west side) of the Dnepr River and west of Russia's border with Belarus. Encircling it would require getting large numbers of mechanized forces across the river and supplying them despite likely Ukrainian attempts to destroy necessary bridges and otherwise disrupt Russian logistics. The river itself is wide and flows in several channels through the city. A large hydroelectric dam roughly four miles north of the city has created a large lake and wide marshy area that runs all the way to the Belarusian border. Attacking forces coming only from Russian territory would likely have to either seize and then defend the bridges within Kyiv itself or conduct opposed river crossings using their own bridging equipment in an urban environment. They could instead attempt to cross downstream of Kyiv and then drive north to encircle it, but the next bridge is roughly 60 miles

southeast of the city and the river remains wide and difficult to bridge, especially if the crossing is opposed, for most of that distance.

The most attractive military option for pursuing this undertaking would therefore have Russian forces coming from southeastern Belarus along the right bank of the Dnepr with logistics lines running back to Belarus and thence back to Russia. The Russian plan apparently suggests such an approach.

A mechanized drive from southeastern Belarus toward Kyiv faces two noteworthy obstacles—the southern reaches of the Pripet Marshes and Chernobyl. The marshes can be difficult, in some places likely impossible, for mechanized forces to traverse when wet, but they also freeze solid in winter.⁹ That freezing may partly explain the reports that the plan is set for execution in late January or early February. Chernobyl is also a manageable obstacle for Russian troops. Russian forces, like most modern militaries, are equipped and trained to operate in environments contaminated by nuclear, radiological, chemical, and biological weapons. The Russians have emphasized such training in their exercises for years.¹⁰ They can reasonably expect to move through the Chernobyl region without serious risk or loss.

The Russian military could also mitigate these problems by moving its base of attack in Belarus further west, circumventing both Chernobyl and the marshes at the expense of a longer line of advance through a population likely to be hostile. The leaked plan apparently considers this option, describing a drive to a “line Korosten-Uman” that would envelop Kyiv from the west and prompt its surrender.¹¹ Korosten is about 90 miles northwest of Kyiv while Uman is 115 miles south of the capital, making this a very wide envelopment.

Russian analysts also focus heavily on the use of Russian airpower in this campaign without specifying

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how it would be used.¹² Western descriptions of the plan do not describe an independent air component.¹³ The Russian military would surely seek to ground and destroy the Ukrainian air force and, particularly, the Turkish TB-2 drones that wrought such havoc on Armenian armored formations in the hands of Azerbaijanis during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the fall of 2020.¹⁴ The Russian air force could attempt decapitation strikes to kill Zelensky, members of the Rada, key military officials, and others, although Russian infiltrators are at least equally likely to attempt assassinations. Russian air power could destroy power plants and other key infrastructure nodes as well to disrupt Ukrainian command, control, communications, and ability to coordinate defenses, as well as to compel the capitulation of cities.¹⁵ Russian aircraft would surely target concentrations of Ukrainian troops and vehicles, especially those known to be equipped with Javelin and other anti-tank systems.¹⁶

Reports of the Russian plan suggest that it aimed in part to achieve a degree of surprise by beginning in the south and shifting north only after Ukrainian forces had moved in response. If so, it will not achieve that effect anymore. The scale of the Russian mobilization and the energy the United States has put into notifying allies and the world of this plan may deprive it of the element of surprise if Putin orders its execution in late January or early February of 2022. The Russians could work to achieve surprise nevertheless in several ways.

- I. If Putin does not execute the plan this winter but instead repeats this mobilization process in the future, he could seek to achieve the kind of surprise Anwar Sadat secured against Israel in the 1973 war.¹⁷ Repeated Egyptian mobilizations before that war in support of exercises simulating invasion numbed the Israeli Defense Force to those exercises and contributed to their total failure to recognize the moment when Sadat was truly ready to attack.
2. The Russian military could adjust the initiation point of the offensive as well as its initial and subsequent targets, relying on the conditioning of this leaked plan to shape erroneous Ukrainian reactions. This scenario famously
3. Putin could also proceed in phases more widely separated from one another. He could begin by moving forces first into Belarus and then openly into Donbas, for example, and then push messaging suggesting that he was done with military activities for the winter. Subsequent limited attack phases could include the drive along the north Azov Sea coast, an attack on Odesa, a drive on Kharkiv, or other operations—each presenting itself as a complete operation and allowing Ukrainian forces time to settle into defending new front lines in each area. That sequence of phases could culminate with a drive on Kyiv, or it could press directly toward accomplishing Putin's political objectives. We will consider these more limited scenarios in more detail below but simply note here that they could also be sub-components of this larger invasion obfuscated as limited and independent efforts of their own.

The Russian plan as described in detail in the German media is highly problematic, contains numerous unreasonably optimistic assumptions, and involves a degree of hand-waving that would be stunning to see from a professional military staff, let alone an officer as competent as Russian Armed Forces Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov.¹⁸

This objection is susceptible to various responses. First, we have only media reporting of the plan and intelligence community officials' comments on it; that reporting may be oversimplified to the point of inaccuracy. Second, the plan obtained by US intelligence could be a strawman or templated laydown of a generic operation written to give the Russian military a concrete basis for identifying where to concentrate forces and a timeline within which to

do so. Third, our judgement of Gerasimov and the Russian General Staff could be wrong—he could be satisfied with a plan based on so many optimistic assumptions.

The reported plan is nevertheless a good place to begin our evaluation of the challenges a Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine would face regardless of the validity of the objection or responses to it. The reported plan raises many of those key challenges and alludes to others. We will consider the solutions to those challenges apparently included in the plan itself as well as other possible solutions. This evaluation can then inform our assessment of the likely risks and costs inherent in Russia's execution of this or even a more sophisticated and sounder plan that can, in turn, in form Western leaders deterrence calculus.

Likely Ukrainian Initial Responses to Full-Scale Invasion

The Ukrainian military will almost certainly fight against such an invasion, for which it is now preparing.¹⁹ Whatever doubts and reservations military personnel might have about their leaders or their prospects, the appearance of enemy mechanized columns driving into one's country tends to concentrate thought and galvanize initial resistance. It collapses complexities and creates binary choices. Military officers and personnel are conditioned to choose to fight in such circumstances, and usually do, at least at first. There is no reason to think the Ukrainian military will perform differently in this case.

Ukrainian civil society is also conditioned to fight Russian invasions by the 2014 attacks and repeated fears of subsequent aggressions. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians demobilized from the ad hoc militia units that formed in 2015 would likely take up arms again in the face of Russian tank columns driving toward Kyiv and other key cities.²⁰ One can easily overstate the determination of Ukrainians to fight,

of course, but that is not the major problem these ad hoc groups would face. Previous Russian invasions conditioned them to fight, but also conditioned them to a certain kind of fight. Ukrainian militia formations generally fought against Russian proxies and were able to do so on relatively even terms because Putin withheld the full weight of Russian military power from the fight. When Russian conventional forces actually did engage directly, as at the Battle of Debaltseve, the Ukrainians were crushed.²¹

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The Ukrainian military has greatly increased its effectiveness, equipment, training, and cohesion since that time, but the Russian military has improved to an even greater degree.²² Russian forces fighting at Debaltseve and elsewhere during the 2014-2015 war, moreover, were not generally fighting as regular units with their normal structures and full complements of troops and equipment.²³ Many of the volunteers who supported the Ukrainian military in 2014 and 2015, on the other hand, have been disbanded and have not been training or exercising (some of those units were instead incorporated into the Ukrainian military).²⁴ There is little ground for optimism that they would present a formidable general obstacle to Russian mechanized and airborne units fighting in their normal complements as the Russians have repeatedly trained to do since 2015.²⁵ Ukrainian forces and irregular troops could, however, create significant delays in particular areas if they establish positions at key bottlenecks with weapons capable of disabling or destroying Russian mechanized vehicles. Such delays could matter if the Russian advance depended on precise timing and the close coordination of attacking columns advancing independently of one another—something the Russian plan appears to require.

Likely Situation Following Initial Invasion

Russian forces attacking on the scale and along the axes of advance laid out in the reported plan would

nevertheless likely achieve their military objectives of destroying the Ukrainian military's ability to continue fighting and encircling major Ukrainian cities (if that is what Putin plans to do). Unless the United States and some NATO states actively participate in the fighting, the major variables are the time it takes the Russian military to achieve these aims and the cost it will have to pay in blood and equipment. The outcome of the initial fighting itself is not in doubt.

Reports of the plan and most discussions of the invasion stop at this point. But decisions and actions beyond this point will determine the success or failure of the entire undertaking. Even assuming that Ukraine's surrounded cities surrender as planned and Putin finds himself in control of much of Ukraine, he then has to do something with this conquered territory to achieve his actual objectives. What he can and will do depends heavily on the situation in Ukraine when the major fighting stops. That situation is likely to be chaotic and ugly.

The Russian invasion outlined in the leaked plan and above is a scaled-up version of the "thunder run" of US forces into Iraq in 2003.²⁶ It leaves Russian forces in control of major population centers but not the countryside. Even in the major population centers, Russian forces will be challenged to secure themselves and stamp out resistance. Kyiv is a city of three-to-four million people; Kharkiv over one and a half million.²⁷ Odesa and Dnipro each have roughly one million inhabitants.²⁸ Russia does not adhere to American counter-insurgency doctrine, to be sure, but the counter-insurgency ratio identified in that doctrine was derived from the study of many insurgencies, not just those in which America was engaged.²⁹ That ratio—of one counter-insurgent per 20 inhabitants—would suggest a counter-insurgency force requirement on the order of 325,000 personnel just for those cities. Russia might well accept a much lower ratio and would surely try to field local forces quickly. But the total number of Russian

troops identified as being prepared for the invasion is 175,000.³⁰ It is unlikely that Russian forces will be able to prevent the transition of Ukrainian resistance into a low-level insurgency if the Ukrainian people choose to attempt it. There is good reason to think they will do so, at least for a time, based on their responses to post-2014 crises.

The question of western Ukraine also becomes prominent in this phase. The plans suggest that Putin does not intend to invade or occupy the most heavily anti-Russian areas of western Ukraine but would rather leave them as some sort of rump statelet, at least for a time.³¹ Doing so would likely make those areas a magnet to which Ukrainians who wished to continue fighting Russia would withdraw, possibly establishing a government-in-exile and means for supporting continued resistance and potentially insurgency within Russian-occupied Ukraine. Putin would surely threaten them with devastating violence—and threaten NATO with war if it moved forces into western Ukraine or supported it in any way—but would risk over-extension if he followed through on threats to attack the enclave, especially if he did so while many of his forces were tied down securing their gains in eastern and central Ukraine. For purposes of this discussion, we assume that he would allow this enclave or statelet to remain free for a time even if it fueled resistance to his consolidation in the rest of the country.

Even assuming that Ukraine's surrounded cities surrender as planned and Putin finds himself in control of much of Ukraine, he then has to do something with this conquered territory to achieve his actual objectives.

Putin might benefit from a brief period of relative calm after the invasion despite all these considerations. The shock of being invaded and overwhelmed would be substantial and could stun even those Ukrainians determined to continue the fight enough to delay and disrupt their efforts. Russia might well have a window of some weeks or even months in which to try to organize a new political order, hunt down would-be resistance leaders, establish Ukrainian forces loyal to itself, and disrupt efforts to develop an insurgency. Moscow has the advantage of having agents throughout Ukraine

who likely already have lengthy target lists to support such efforts, as well as potential proxies identified and possibly partially prepared to play roles in securing the country and undermining resistance.³²

The psychological effects of an invasion and their duration are hard to predict and likely depend on many factors. If Putin can achieve meaningful surprise, then the shock and subsequent disruption of efforts to counter him will likely be severe. The current Ukrainian information space, as discussed in Part I of this report, suggests that he might achieve some level of psychological surprise if he invaded within the next few weeks, but that he is unlikely to achieve surprise if he waits until the plan's reported initiation date in late January or early February. If the Russian deployments in preparation for this attack continue over the coming months and Russian conditions-setting in the information space expands Ukrainians are likely to begin taking the risk of attack more seriously. Some will likely set conditions for resistance and, if necessary, insurgency and will have some time to do so.

The net effects of the shock value of an invasion and Russia's inherent advantages in moving quickly to take advantage of the shock period are thus likely to be reduced if Putin carries through with the attack as reportedly planned this winter. Putin would likely seek to increase those effects through coordinated cyber and information campaigns, sabotage and other infiltrator activities, and possibly other non-military or irregular warfare adjuncts that are either not in the intercepted plan or not included in media reports of it.

Putin may thus need to establish new conditions of government and a new political climate in Kyiv against the backdrop of at least limited continuing resistance and proto-insurgency, against which his military forces and intelligence services would be focusing their efforts. He has no reason to be confident that he would face a more stable situation, although it is certainly possible that he could. Much depends on the path he chooses to take in governing a conquered Ukraine and the relative time-space relationships between Russia's efforts to establish a new mode of governance and the efforts of Ukrainian oppositionists to build an effective resistance.

How Would Putin Rule a Conquered Ukraine?

Putin's purpose in invading Ukraine would be, in large part, to establish a new government and new political order amenable to Russia and his aims.³³ The fact that such would be his objective raises the burden on him to think through a post-conflict political order beyond the "you-break-it-you-own-it" principle. This dangerous military undertaking will almost certainly be a failure if it does not result in a relatively stable political order oriented on Moscow.

The political transformation Putin seeks goes beyond replacing Zelensky with someone more suitable. Putin will surely also insist on changes to Ukraine's constitution, particularly removing the commitment to join NATO and likely replacing it with a ban on joining the Western alliance.³⁴ He will likely seek binding commitments for deeper integration of the Ukrainian and Russian economies, for the permanent expulsion of Western military advisors and equipment, for joining and fully participating in Russia-led institutions such as the CSTO, and possibly other concessions.

Putin has been steadily driving both Ukraine and the West toward these conditions without invading. He has suffered setbacks and encountered obstacles, some resulting from or strengthened by his own errors, as outlined in Part I of this report, but he has been adapting his approach as well. If he decides to invade Ukraine now, the likeliest explanation for this about-face in Russian strategy would be a determination to cement his legacy, of which he has openly identified the reintegration of Ukraine as a central part. If legacy drives him to such a dangerous endeavor, then he is unlikely to be satisfied with an outcome that can be readily put at risk in the future. He surely would not want to leave Ukraine in a state that might require some successor to re-invade it, with Putin taking the blame for not having done it right to begin with.

But Putin cannot adopt the most straightforward approach to reintegrating a lost Soviet land by force—crushing it militarily and keeping large armed forces in it to crush its people into obedience over

decades—if the Ukrainians establish a viable resistance or proto-insurgency. That Soviet approach ultimately failed, for one thing, although Putin blames Mikhail Gorbachev's weak stomach for the failure, and it would ruin Russia. The expense of maintaining a large occupation force, whether military or paramilitary, would drain the Russian treasury faster than Putin could hope to refill it.

We have no public discussions of Putin's thinking on this matter, but the entire tenor of Russian military and state security doctrine argues that he would calculate this way. The Russian approach to conflict is explicitly designed to offset the terrible economic disadvantages Russia faces against the West.³⁵ Putin constantly makes clear that he is acutely aware of Russia's economic limitations. It would be completely inconsistent with a two-decade-old pattern for him to accept such a devastating economic price that could put at risk not merely his or his successors' hold on Ukraine, but even their hold on power in Moscow. He is extremely unlikely, therefore, to set up some sort of "Ukrainian Democratic Republic" modeled on the German Democratic Republic of the Cold War days and kept in line by a vicious domestic dictatorship backed up by tens or hundreds of thousands of Russian troops.

Putin is equally unlikely to adopt another straightforward approach—annexing Ukraine directly to Russia as a collection of separate provinces. He adopted this approach with Crimea in 2014 but has steadfastly refused to do it with Donbas or even the territories he seized from Georgia in 2008. His reluctance to absorb the DNR and LNR likely results first and foremost from the fact that he benefits from the leverage their continued formal existence within the independent Ukrainian state provides.³⁶ But he is also likely deterred by the cost that rebuilding them would impose on the Russian state if he annexed them. His continued pressure on Kyiv to "normalize" the areas he occupies and take

This dangerous military undertaking will almost certainly be a failure if it does not result in a relatively stable political order oriented on Moscow.

responsibility for them is clearly intended in part to get Kyiv to pay for them.³⁷ In annexing the vast areas of Ukraine occupied after an invasion of this type, Putin would inherit the same problem on a scale orders of magnitude larger. The Ukrainian economy, properly rebuilt and integrated, could eventually become an engine for Russian economic growth, to be sure. But the up-front costs of reconstructing it after the damages of an invasion and then reorienting it to orbit Moscow would likely be staggering.

Putin simply does not have the cash to afford this and does not likely desire the responsibility.

Putin might hope, in fact, for a much more optimistic (for him) outcome—a new Ukrainian state that is independent of Russia but permanently politically, economically, and socially aligned with Moscow. He would not have to maintain a large military or security garrison in such a state, nor would he have to support it economically. He might hope to achieve this outcome by one of at least two possible routes. He might facilitate the formation of a new Ukrainian political order himself in a fashion similar to the one the US used to build new Afghan and Iraqi governments after the military operations of 2001 and 2003.³⁸ Alternatively, he might court a sort of Vichy Ukraine, whereby some pro-Russian leader emerges from the wreck of the invasion, surrenders on behalf of Ukraine, and undertakes to accept Putin's dictates and run the country (or as much as Putin chooses to leave to that person) in Putin's interests.

The challenges of overseeing the formation of a new government under the barrels of Russian tanks are daunting. Putin observed and no doubt learned lessons from the US experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the truth is that such an undertaking is inherently fraught. He could well have to form that new government in the context of continued resistance, possibly moving toward proto-insurgency, as described above, and against the backdrop of a wrecked economy. He should remember the

difficulty of accomplishing such a task from his own experience in Ukraine's east. Russian efforts to establish effective control of the DNR and LNR via local proxies faltered for years and required constant intervention—even in regions with high degrees of sympathy toward Russia and effectively no internal resistance to Russian rule. Those regions continue to drain the Russian economy. Replicating even that level of success would be much more challenging in a post-invasion Kyiv.

A Vichy Ukraine scenario is somewhat more plausible. Putin has no lack of candidates for the mantle of a Ukrainian Pétain, and he would surely put his security services to work quickly building the infrastructure one would need to try to govern. But Putin would likely recall two good reasons to doubt the long-term efficacy of such a solution. First, the Vichy government itself lasted barely two years—Hitler invaded and occupied Vichy France in 1942 after the allied landings in North Africa, partly because he mistrusted it as the war continued and partly because it was ineffective against the Free French resistance.³⁹ Second, Putin also has experience with something like this scenario. Former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was a largely reliable Russian agent governing Ukraine mainly in Putin's interest. But he was an ineffective ruler of Ukraine trying to guide the country in a direction many Ukrainians opposed—and doing it badly. His overthrow in the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution was the event that triggered Putin's intervention in the first place. Putin might decide to try again with a new person and a more rigorous and possibly brutal approach to setting conditions and supporting that person but doing so would risk leaving his successor a mess rather than a clean legacy.

Putin is most likely, therefore, to attempt a larger-scale version of the system he ultimately settled on in Donbas—a formal political leader who is a vetted Russian proxy and ostensibly controls the government, backed up by a parallel security structure manned partly by Russians and partly by Ukrainians but entirely

under direct Russian control and likely integrated into the Russian chain of command as are the military forces of the DNR and LNR.⁴⁰ This approach would allow him to maintain the fiction of an independent Ukrainian state—including giving him a series of potential scapegoats in the proxy political leaders who could be jettisoned whenever public pressure or embarrassment required—while leaving him fully in charge of the internal security apparatus, technically behind the scenes.

Attractive as Putin might find this approach, however, he will likely find it very difficult to implement rapidly. Some of the years it took Russia to create such structures in the DNR and LNR were spent exploring alternative options and looking for acceptable leaders, but some reflected the reality that it just takes time to get it right. Putin could take the time he needed in Donbas because, annoying as the expense of keeping Russian control of the area in the interim no doubt was, it was small enough for him to absorb it.

Putin will not risk losing control of Ukraine if he has to wage war to gain it. He would be unlikely, therefore, to withdraw his military forces completely or reduce his security service deployments substantially until he is confident that his proxy structure will hold. It should take him many months to gain much confidence at all and some years to gain it fully. He would have to be ready to keep a large contingent of Russian troops and security service elements committed to suppressing unrest and building proxy forces in Ukraine for two to three years in any event, at least if he were at all serious. The actual expense of such an undertaking would be large. The opportunity cost of focusing so many limited assets on this task would be even larger. Putin would

have to accept the likelihood of a steady drip of Russian casualties at the hands of any resistance or proto-insurgency—a drip that cost his predecessors in office dearly.

Putin certainly could find ways to govern a conquered Ukraine, and he might well

Putin is most likely, therefore, to attempt a larger-scale version of the system he ultimately settled on in Donbas.

decide to pay the prices and take the risks considered above in return for completing this vital part of his legacy. But such decisions would be fundamental deviations from the patterns of thought, behavior, and action he has pursued for two decades. They would be, in many respects, irrational, driven by an ideological need and psychic urge to take real risks and pay real prices for abstract

benefits. People change, of course, especially toward the ends of their lives. But we should look for solid evidence that Putin's thought process and calculations really have changed so fundamentally that he would either overlook these problems or accept these costs before accepting at face value the invasion plan he is ostensibly pursuing.

Courses of Action Subordinate to COA I: A Full Invasion of Ukraine

The full invasion of Ukraine consists of several major parts. Putin could execute almost every major sub-component of the plan independently of the others. He might do so, as discussed above, to attempt to regain surprise after this plan was leaked, intending to achieve the same effect of invading and occupying Ukraine as described above but in a phased manner. But he might also execute several of these sub-COAs on their own to achieve independent objectives without intending to go all the way to full-scale invasion. We will consider the major sub-COAs here ordered by the likelihood we assess for each and laying out the separate objectives each might pursue beyond setting conditions for the full-scale invasion.

Sub-COA 1a: Deploy Forces to Belarus

ISW has long been forecasting that Putin would permanently deploy Russian ground forces into Belarus at a moment of his choosing.⁴¹ He has fully set conditions for doing so in the military and information spaces.⁴² Russian troops have exercised extensively with Belarusian troops, demonstrating and improving their abilities to operate in combined groups and also familiarizing Russian troops with Belarusian terrain and military installations, doctrine, communications protocols, and habits.⁴³

Sub-COA 1a Objectives

Deploying Russian ground forces into Belarus would accomplish several important objectives for Putin. It would establish Russian dominance of and control over Belarus clearly and unmistakably, ending the dance Lukashenko has almost inexplicably led Putin over many years.⁴⁴ It would likely cement the reality of a Belarusian-Russian Union State controlled by Moscow and the integration of the Russian and Belarusian militaries.⁴⁵

This deployment would also establish Russian ground forces able to operate from secure bases on the Polish border. Russia already maintains a large concentration of troops, ships, airplanes, and missiles in the Kaliningrad exclave, which borders Poland and Lithuania.⁴⁶ But the exclave is also vulnerable, separated as it is by the Suwalki Corridor even from Belarus—and many long miles from the nearest permanent Russian ground forces base. NATO forces could (and should) hold Kaliningrad at risk in a war or potential war with Russia, and Putin would have to make difficult decisions about whether and how to escalate or cut painful losses if NATO did so. Russian ground forces in Belarus face no such threat. Their lines of communication back to Russia would be solid and secure. They would have operational depth within which to maneuver in Belarus itself and strategic depth if Putin chose to pull them back into Russia.

Russian forces in Belarus would dramatically increase the threat Putin could make against NATO's ability to support its Baltic allies through the Suwalki corridor. The forces in Kaliningrad already threaten that vital chokepoint, to be sure, but their vulnerabilities could leave them open to neutralization as already mentioned. Russian ground forces based near Grodno in northwest Belarus would put a pincer on the Suwalki Corridor and bring Russian ground reinforcements in easy reach of Kaliningrad.⁴⁷ NATO would have to think hard and fast about how to secure its ground line of communication through the Corridor in such a scenario. Putin would likely seek to use the doubt created by this situation to undermine NATO's confidence in its ability to defend the Baltic States and those states' confidence in NATO's will to do so, as we have explained elsewhere.⁴⁸

Russian forces in Belarus would dramatically increase the threat Putin could make against NATO's ability to support its Baltic allies through the Suwalki corridor.

Russian forces in Belarus could also threaten Warsaw itself if concentrated in enough force. They could provide leverage for Putin to bring against Poland and further his efforts to split NATO's eastern and western members from one another, especially if the US and western members refused to reinforce Poland. Putin is highly unlikely to invade Poland, to be sure, and nothing in this paper should be construed to suggest that he would. But states and militaries react to threats as well as actions, and the appearance of a significant mechanized Russian force on the western Belarusian border would be an entirely new threat with which Poland and NATO would have to cope.

A deployment to Belarus is also essential if Putin wants to be able to attack Ukraine along the right bank of the Dnepr River, as discussed above.

Sub-COA 1a Deployment Options:

If and when Putin does move ground forces into Belarus, the locations to which he sends them and the types of units he sends could indicate the likelihood that he is preparing to attack Ukraine.

The ideal location for Putin to base forces readying for an attack on Ukraine would be in Gomel Province in southeastern Belarus.⁴⁹ This area does not apparently hold the kind of military infrastructure the Russian army would prefer to use as a base of mechanized operations, however. The largest known military area is the Belarusian portion of the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Of the various reasons

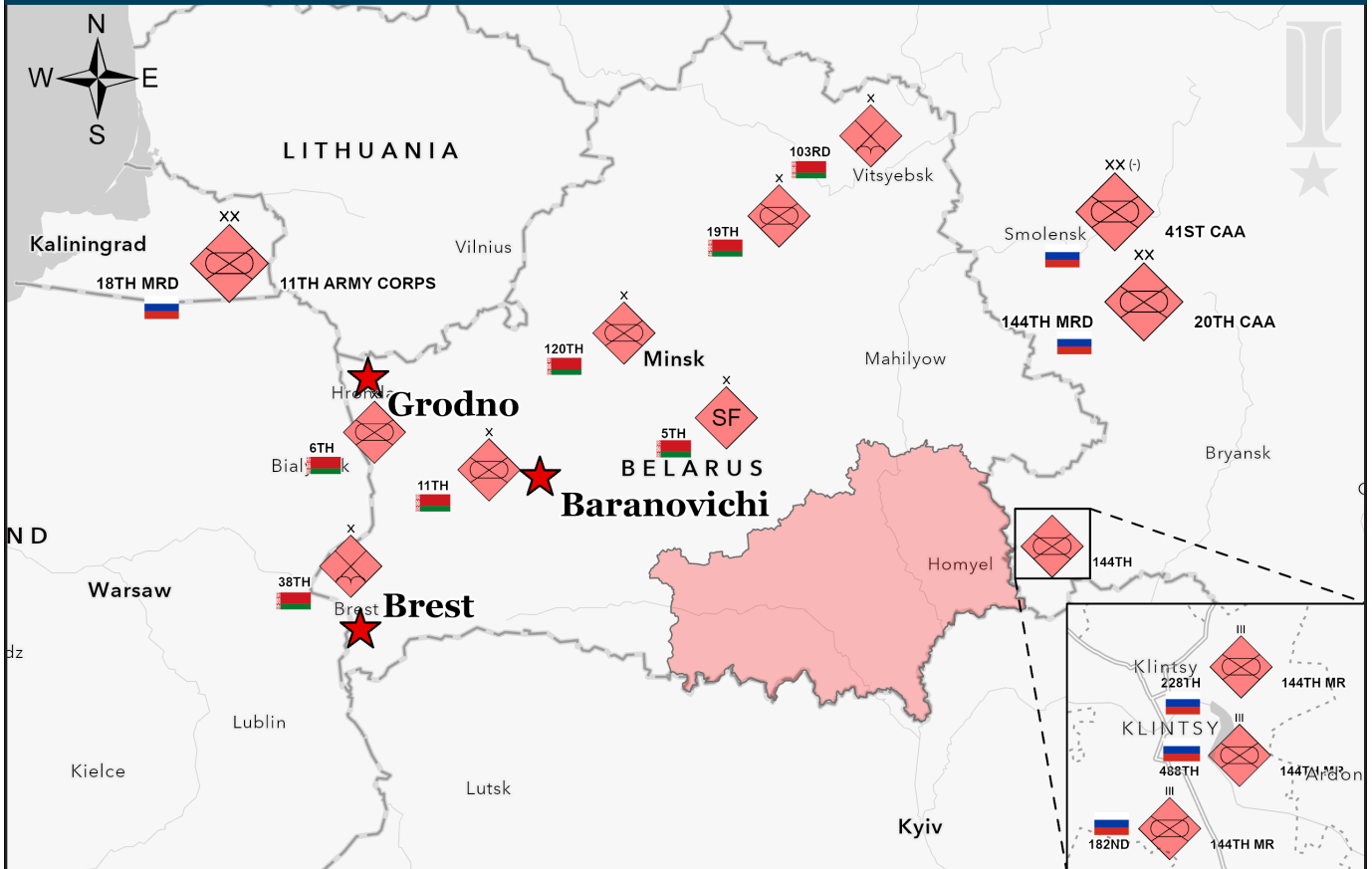
Putin might eschew that option the main, is that it lacks actual usable military infrastructure. The province otherwise hosts only a small and basic military airfield and a few ammunition depots. The Russian military would therefore likely have to set up an expeditionary base in this region, building up stocks of fuel and ammunition, among other things, to support the drive on Kyiv. Such an activity would be highly visible and would take some time. It would also be so obvious a preparation for the

drive down the Dnepr that it would undermine any attempt at achieving surprise on that axis even if the attack followed immediately on the completion of the base. Putin might order forces to move to Gomel and establish a base there, withholding the attack until a later time and seeking to benefit for now solely from the panic that would result from the danger that he might attack from that area.

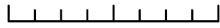
The next most attractive location for an attack on Belarus might be the large training area near Baranovichi in central-west Belarus.⁵⁰ This position has a large base as well as a robust airfield. It is, however, well inside Belarus and a long way from Kyiv. Establishing Russian forces here would nevertheless serve several purposes. Those forces could be used to threaten Ukraine or invade, despite the distance, since it is still one of the closest positions in Belarus to Kyiv. But Baranovichi would also be a good base for a mechanized force threatening Poland and Lithuania slightly less immediately than a deployment on the border itself. Putin could present a deployment to this Baranovichi as non-escalatory and then decry any NATO move of reinforcements toward the Belarusian border. A mechanized force at



COA Ia: Russian Deployment to Belarus



0 70 140 280 Kilometers



Potential Russian Deployment Site

Gomel Province



Russian Unit



Belarusian Unit

Map by George Barros
Institute for the Study of War © 2021

Spatial Reference: WGS 1984 Web Mercator (auxiliary sphere)

Baranovichi could serve as a reserve in the (extraordinarily unlikely) event of a NATO invasion or serve as an exploitation echelon following an attack on NATO by front line forces nearer the borders. Either would be in accord with Russian doctrine in general. Elements of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army exercised at this base in September 2021, as mentioned in Part I of this report.⁵¹

Putin might also deploy forces to the southwestern Belarusian base near Brest. Belarus maintains an airborne brigade there, and Russian airborne forces have repeatedly exercised there.⁵² The most obvious Russian move would be to station an airborne unit permanently (or on some continuous rotational basis) alongside the Belarusian airborne unit at Brest. Such a deployment would be interesting because of the role airborne units normally

play. Russia's airborne units are the most elite conventional military units it has. They can deploy long distances rapidly on short notice, as most airborne units in any military can do. Putting one right up against the enemy's border would be a somewhat odd thing to do for a unit with such great geographic mobility. Yet the front line Russian unit facing the Baltic States is the 76th Airborne Division based around Pskov. Its position near NATO's easternmost border has not prevented Putin from deploying it to various locations, and he might similarly have no concerns about pinning that or another airborne unit at Brest. The most dangerous move he could make from NATO's perspective would be to move a mechanized unit to this location, which is about 100 miles southeast of Warsaw. The base would likely require refitting to support a large mechanized unit, but Russian and Belarusian airborne units are very heavily mechanized by Western standards, so the effort required might not be as large as it might seem.

The final obvious location for a Russian deployment in Belarus is for a mechanized unit to join the Belarusian mechanized brigade near Grodno. We have discussed the implications of such a deployment above and at greater length elsewhere.⁵³ This deployment would compel a re-evaluation of NATO plans for the defense of the Baltic States and even of Poland.

Putin might deploy forces to Brest, Grodno, Baranovichi, or any combination of the three without intending to use those forces to attack Ukraine this winter but still meaning to support a large-scale invasion of Ukraine using other forces based only in Russia or at a later time. If Putin has reason to fear a NATO military response to such an invasion, he might wish to present threats to Poland and the Baltic States to deter NATO action on Ukraine's behalf. He might also conceivably use such deployments to create the impression that he is going to strike north or west rather than at Ukraine, although the nature of the information operation Moscow has been conducting would need to change to support such a threat, feint, or operation. It remains unclear at this time why Putin would contemplate such an action as his first major attack in a new campaign.

Sub-COA Ib: Overt Deployment in Donbas

Russian forces controlled by the 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA) based near Rostov have been in the Donbas region of Ukraine since 2014.⁵⁴ The Kremlin has consistently denied that any of its military forces are there, however, attributing all military activities and capabilities in occupied Donbas to its DNR and LNR proxies. The West has accepted this fiction, as discussed above, as part of the Minsk II accord and the Normandy Format talks. Putin has clearly seen benefits in continuing both those initiatives and that fiction. The requirement to keep the Russian force presence in occupied Donbas at a threshold of this implausible deniability, however, constrains Putin's ability to manifest a constant and immediate threat to invade more of southeastern Ukraine. He could decide that the benefit of the obfuscation is no longer worth the cost for several reasons.

First, the Russian position in occupied Crimea suffers from the absence of a land bridge connecting it to Russia proper. All Russian supplies to the peninsula must move by air, sea, or over a bridge the Russians built over the Kerch Strait. The problem is magnified by the fact that Crimea historically depended on water from a canal flowing south from the Dnepr. Ukraine shut off that water supply after the Russian seizure and annexation of the peninsula, plunging it into a constant struggle for fresh water.⁵⁵ Putin could decide that establishing the land bridge between Rostov and Crimea is important enough to warrant casting aside the veil he has been using to claim a mediator role in the Minsk and Normandy discussions.

Second, Russian forces attempting to invade unoccupied Ukraine from occupied Donbas would confront the most well-established and entrenched Ukrainian defensive positions anywhere on the Ukrainian border. They would have to fight a breakthrough battle to gain the ability to maneuver freely on deeper objectives. Such a battle could be costly and, more importantly, could be subject to unexpected delays if the well-prepared Ukrainian forces facing them put up a serious fight even in the face of Russian armored columns. Russian forces preparing

for such an attack would first have to concentrate on the Russian side of the international border and then move into and through Donbas, giving the Ukrainians additional time to prepare to defend. Putin could decide that he wanted to be able to launch an attack on this axis with much less notice using forces overtly prepared in occupied Donbas for this purpose.

Third, the overt deployment of Russian troops into Donbas would put great pressure on Zelensky from all sides. The United States, France, Germany, and the rest of NATO would likely press Zelensky to avoid “escalating” or doing anything to “provoke” Putin—that, at least, has been the pattern of Western reactions to every Russian escalation including the current mobilization. They would likely insist that Zelensky refrain from making adequate preparations to defend against Russian attack at the border as well as from retaliating in any way. Western pressure, in other words, would likely demand Zelensky’s relative quiescence in the face of such a Russian move as the condition for additional Western aid of any sort.

Elements of the Ukrainian military and population, on the other hand, would be furious and would likely demand responses by Zelensky.⁵⁶ The Ukrainian military would want to build up its defensive positions. Ukrainians with strong anti-Russian views, especially demobilized fighters, would likely press Zelensky to stand up to Putin and show his commitment to Ukraine’s independence. Zelensky is vulnerable to this kind of pressure because he ran on a platform of peace with Russia that did not sit well with some Ukrainians and has subsequently made a series of concessions to Putin for which Ukraine has received little in return.⁵⁷

A Russian deployment into occupied Donbas by itself might not trigger a crisis in Kyiv, but it could advance preparations for one if that were Putin’s aim and if other Russian information operations were driving in the same direction. We will consider a course of action oriented on creating and

A Russian deployment into occupied Donbas by itself might not trigger a crisis in Kyiv, but it could advance preparations for one.

exploiting just such an internal Ukrainian crisis in a subsequent report.

The specific details of what units, what kind of units, and where units would deploy in occupied Donbas are relatively less important than were such considerations in the Belarus case. Putin could use elements of any of several motor rifle or tank units, along

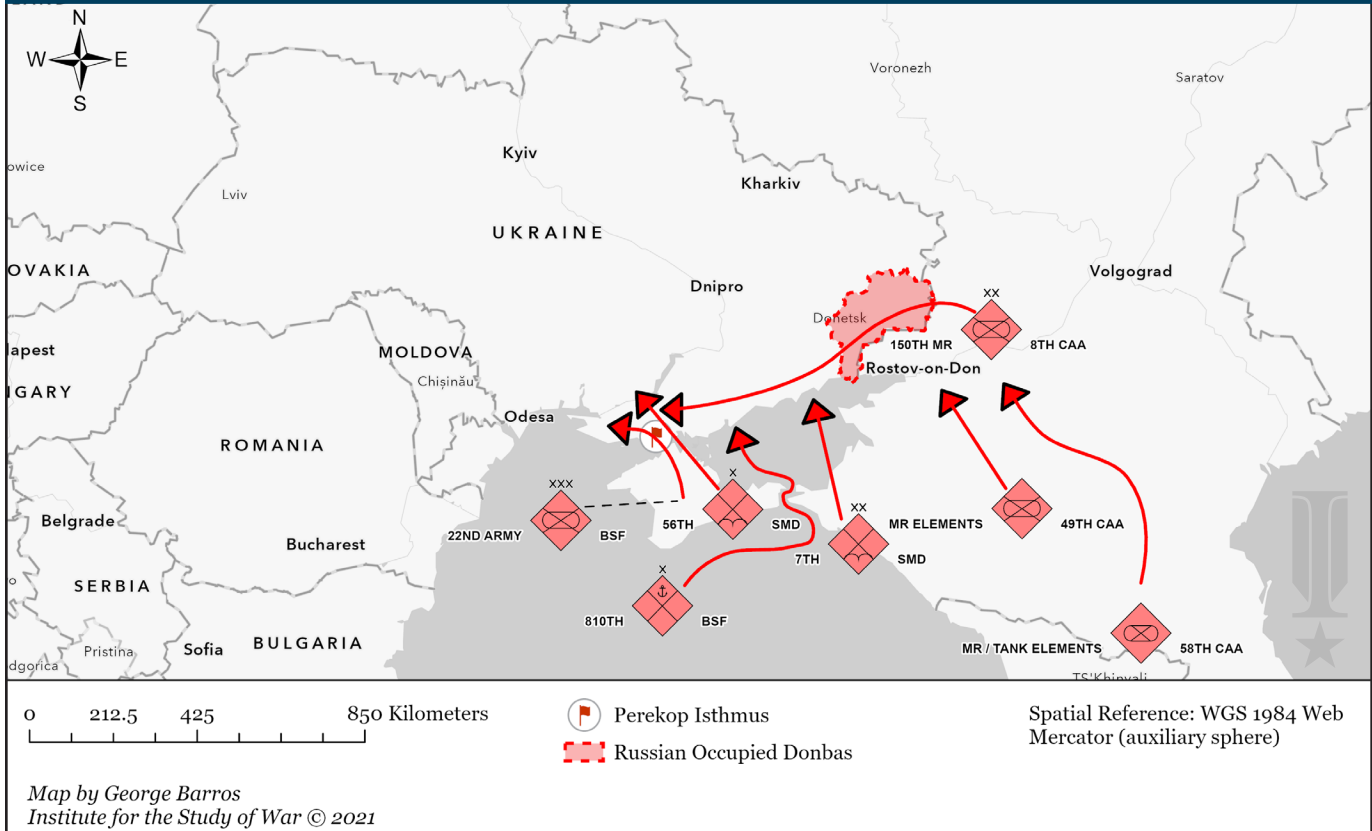
with artillery, command and control elements, and other enablers. The specific units and the particular locations in Donbas to which they deploy might change forecasts of subsequent Russian operations, but at a lower level of significance than was the case in our evaluation of possible Belarus deployments. We will therefore omit closer examination of them at this time.

Sub-COA 1c: Create a Land Bridge from Rostov to Crimea

Putin might choose this option for the reasons described above under COA 1b, deciding not merely to deploy the forces needed to establish the land bridge but actually to do it. This COA would accomplish all the same objectives as 1b along with several others.

Securing a land route from Rostov to Crimea would require taking the heavily defended city of Mariupol and then charging down the coastal highway through Berdyansk, Primorsk, and Melitopol to the top of the Perekop Isthmus. Russian forces would surely secure not merely the road but also a strip of land some distance to the north to make it harder for Ukrainian forces subsequently to attack or disrupt traffic along the road. Russian forces would likely refrain, in this limited COA, from attempting to take Zaporizhia, a city of roughly three-quarters of a million people on the southeastern Dnepr bend, but probably would seek to control important road junctions southeast of the city, such as Tokmak and Polohy.⁵⁸ The net effect of such operations would be to disrupt Ukrainian economic activity in the remaining unoccupied portion of the country, disruptions that

COA Ic: Land Bridge to Crimea



could have major macroeconomic effects in Kyiv with all the resulting pressures on Zelensky.

This COA would also allow Russian forces in Crimea to move north of the Perekop Isthmus in force. Russian troops would almost certainly seize the Dnepr Canal and the lands around it, possibly securing positions along the Dnepr from the Black Sea northeast to some point past Kherson or Kahovka. The Dnepr remains a formidable obstacle, especially here near its mouth. Positions along the river would nevertheless facilitate preparations for opposed crossings if necessary and, of course, allow the Russians to disrupt riverine traffic to and from the sea, possibly striking another major economic blow.

The main impact of this COA is that it would be the first new Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2014-2015 and would mark a watershed in the crisis. Putin would closely observe Western reactions to see if NATO or any member states intended to provide concrete military support to Ukraine during an attack and draw conclusions about the wisdom and potential costs of future attacks. The advantage to Putin of conducting this COA rather than the full-scale invasion outright is that he could more readily stop this advance and even pull it back if Western determination or Ukrainian resistance seemed likely to impose unacceptable costs on him. In contrast, it is much harder to see him reining in the full attack depicted in COA I and the leaked plans once he embarks upon them, simply because of the level of personal honor and geostrategic credibility

involved. This COA gives him offramps and would allow him to stop and declare a plausible victory after enveloping Mariupol or securing the Dnepr-Crimea canal line, for example.

Sub-COA 1c Forces and Indicators

Russia already has many of the forces it would require to execute this COA in place either in Crimea or near Rostov. Putin would likely reinforce with additional airborne units drawn from any of the airborne divisions and brigades around Russia. He might also send mechanized elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army, normally deployed in the Caucasus, toward Donbas along with mechanized elements of the Central Military District.⁵⁹ The primary military challenges to Russia of this COA include massing sufficient force to envelop and force the rapid surrender of Mariupol—which is well-defended—and conducting air drops or air assaults from Crimea to positions northeast of the Perekop Isthmus.⁶⁰ Putin might attempt to use naval infantry elements based at Sevastopol to land on the northern Azov Sea littoral, in which case the loading of those troops and the movement of their ships through the Kerch Strait would be a partial indicator that this operation is underway.

Sub-COA 1d: Odesa

Putin and Russian officials have made it clear that they regard Odesa as a potential target because of the relatively large proportion of the population they assess to be “ethnic Russians” or pro-Russia.⁶¹ The main reason for Putin to covet Odesa is that seizing it would give him de facto control over the entire Ukrainian coastline, leaving Ukraine effectively landlocked. Such an action would be devastating to Ukraine’s economy and could well place Zelensky or any Ukrainian leader in an almost untenable position.

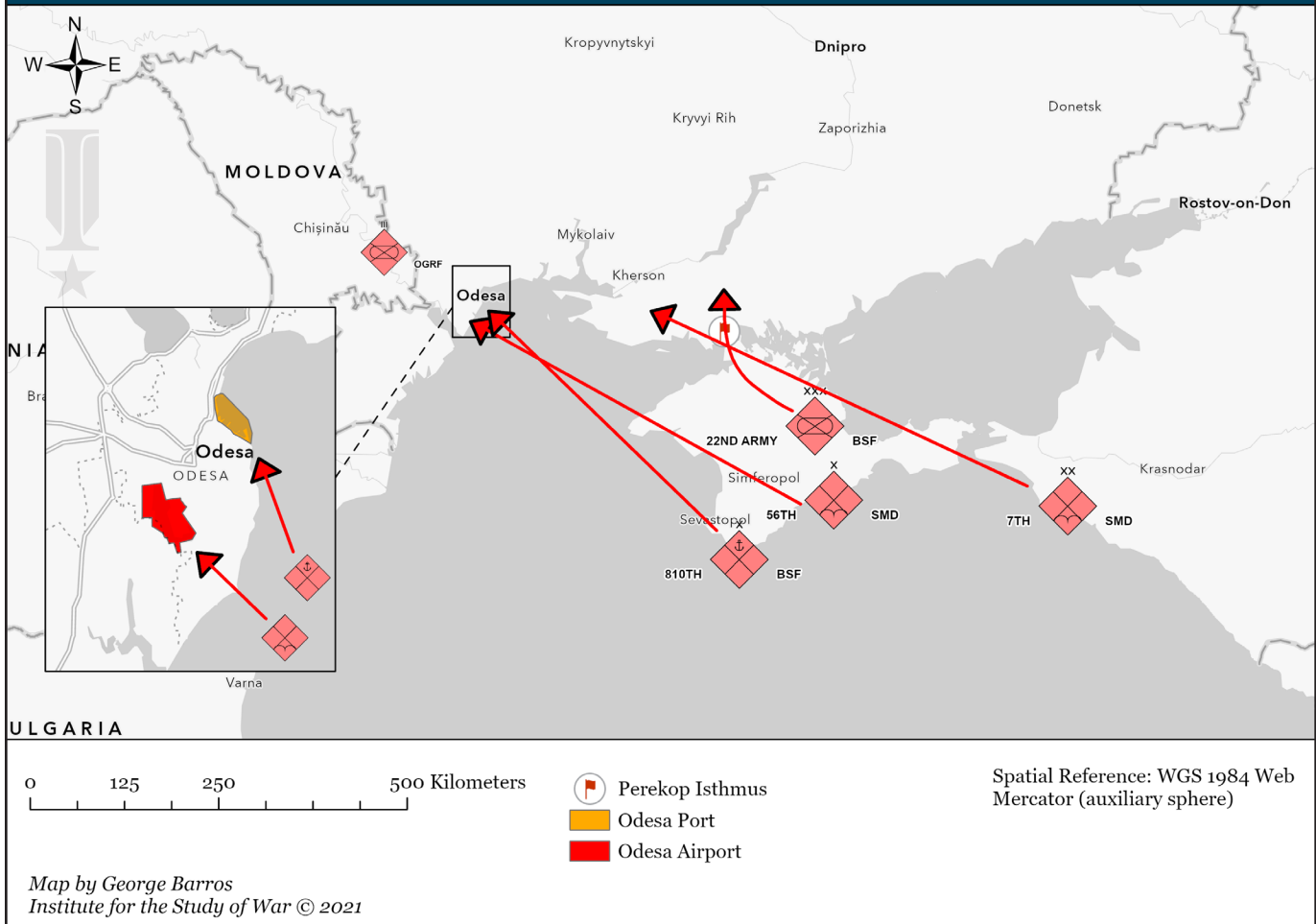
The likeliest indicator for an independent operation of this sort would be the execution of a Russian information campaign built around the premise that Ukrainians were threatening “ethnic Russians” in the area with violence, dispossession, or some sort of

large-scale repression against which Russia “had to” protect them.⁶² Russian officials periodically circulate such memes, including references to the “risks” of Ukrainians conducting “Srebrenica”-type genocidal attacks against Russians in Ukraine.⁶³ Those references most often appear to refer to Donbas or eastern Ukraine but could be modified to set conditions for this COA, especially if accompanied by Russian agents provocateurs staging incidents.

The main challenge Russian forces would face in executing such a COA is that they have no quick ground route to initiate the attack or reliably reinforce and support it. The operation to seize Odesa would therefore be conducted initially by naval infantry of the 810th brigade from Sevastopol and airborne/air assault troops from the 56th Airborne Regiment in Crimea, 7th Airborne Division in Novorossiysk, and possibly elsewhere in Russia. Elements of the Caspian Sea Flotilla’s two naval infantry battalions may support this assault. Russian forces would likely land initially on beaches and landing zones slightly outside the city, moving quickly to take control of port facilities and the airport to ensure access to maritime and aerial resupply.

The Russian concept for attacking Odesa in the plan published by German media is very different. It describes an amphibious landing well east of the city followed by a drive west to link up with Russian forces in Transnistria, thus “encircling” the city and forcing its capitulation.⁶⁴ Such an operation is possible, but would be quite daring, as it would require not only landing sufficient troops and vehicles on open beaches but also supplying them on a mechanized drive of perhaps 60 miles to link up with troops that are themselves not terribly well supplied for major combat operations—and doing it all without first having secured a port or airfield.

An attack on Odesa would likely be accompanied by a drive from the northern part of the Perekop Isthmus toward Kherson with the objective of opening a ground line of communication between Crimea and Odesa. Such an undertaking would be risky, as the Dnepr River is a major obstacle, especially if Ukrainian forces fought hard to obstruct a crossing.



Russian SPETSNAZ and air assault units could play key roles in an attack on Odesa by seeking to seize the two major bridges over the Dnepr and/or Odesa's airfield and port facilities. Russia might seek to use infiltrated agents to accomplish or set conditions for some of these tasks. The descriptions of the plan in German media suggest that the Russians would take such actions, but that the objective would be to secure the bridges to prevent Ukrainian troops from using them, rather than to link up with the forces landing near Odesa.⁶⁵

The risk of conducting such operations lies in the danger that Ukrainian defenders will delay or even stop the establishment of a land route from Odesa to Crimea, requiring the forces in Odesa itself to rely on air and maritime replenishment. Ukraine can increase that risk by acquiring and using missile and drone systems able to threaten Russian supply aircraft and ships.⁶⁶ Russia can likely identify anti-shipping missile systems able to damage its vessels significantly and destroy them from the air.⁶⁷ However, the deployment of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) at scale would pose a considerable challenge to Russia's ability to flow

supplies and reinforcements in by air until they established a wide perimeter around the airfield and along the landing approaches to it.⁶⁸

Russia maintains a relatively small force of mechanized infantry in Transnistria in Moldova whose proximity to Odesa might make it attractive as a potential reinforcement for such an operation, as the German media description of the plan suggests.⁶⁹ The readiness and capability of those units has been questionable historically, although they have regularly participated in exercises.⁷⁰ Using them would also create complexities with the Moldovan government and could trigger NATO responses aimed at supporting member-state Romania, which Moldova borders. Russia would more likely feint with these forces than use them in a limited scenario such as this sub-COA, but the possibility that they could be used in direct support of an Odesa operation remains real.

Forces and Indicators for Sub-COA 1d

The main forces required for this operation are the naval infantry at Sevastopol and their landing ships, covering vessels of the Black Sea Fleet, SPETSNAZ, and airborne troops. Flying airborne formations over the Black Sea poses slightly more risk to Russia than doing so over the Sea of Azov, as in the previous scenario, simply because both Ukraine and NATO have considerably more capability to interfere with such flights due to the proximity of the main Ukrainian naval base at Mykolaiv, the proximity of Romanian positions close to Odesa itself as well as flight routes to the city, and the current deployment of the USS *Arleigh Burke* to the Black Sea.⁷¹ Russia is more likely to rely on airborne units either already in Crimea or staging from the peninsula to shorten flight times and warning. Ukraine could expect, therefore, an initial concentration of airborne forces in Crimea and the neighboring northern Caucasus region across the Kerch Strait prior to such an attack. That said, Russia could still use airborne troops from more distant bases flown direct to Odesa, particularly if it established informational cover

to portray them as doing something else. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has publicly reported the movement of an airborne brigade/regiment to Crimea already, as noted in part I. If Russian plans for this COA included establishing a land route from Crimea to Odesa, the Russian military would need to concentrate sufficient force in the northern Crimean peninsula to break out from the northern Perekop Isthmus and support a drive toward Kherson. Russia would likely further reinforce the mechanized formations already stationed in Crimea in advance of such an operation.

Sub-COA 1e: Kharkiv

Kharkiv is an important city of nearly 1.5 million people relatively close to the Russian border in northeastern Ukraine.⁷² It has a high concentration of people Putin would regard as “ethnic Russians.”⁷³ Taking this city would be an essential part of a plan to invade unoccupied Ukraine, as it stands athwart important lines of communication leading to Dnipro and the Dnepr line generally. Putin might decide to seize it in an independent operation to facilitate a subsequent drive on the Dnepr line. It would cause panic and crisis in Kyiv and drive Zelensky to plead for NATO help that would be unlikely to come—Kharkiv is about as far from NATO countries as any position Putin might attack and close enough to the Russian border that a mechanized drive would reach it very quickly.

The major challenge with this COA from the Russian perspective is that success would likely depend on actually taking and securing this large city, whereas the Odesa scenario could achieve important initial success by seizing and holding the airfield, the port, and a route connecting them—or, as the German media-reported plan has it, driving across open country to Moldova. The residents of Kharkiv and its environs are by no means fully pro-Russian, and many would likely resist. Russian forces would either have to use the approach laid out in reports of the leaked plan—surrounding the city, cutting off services, and waiting for it to capitulate—or

drive rapidly into it and control it block by block. The risks for Russia of either approach would be enormous.

If Russian forces surrounded the city and tried to force its capitulation, they would be vulnerable to Ukrainian counter-attacks from the west and south against which they would have to defend. The requirement to defend against such counter-attacks, supported by Ukrainian drone operations and airstrikes, might well draw Russia into a larger air campaign against Ukraine, expanding this initially limited undertaking toward full-scale war.

The inevitable delay of days or weeks as the Russians waited for the city to capitulate would give NATO and the international community time to rally and could raise pressure on the West to act in some way on humanitarian grounds among other things. President Biden has said he would not consider sending US forces to defend Ukraine unilaterally, and a NATO decision to commit the alliance to Ukraine's defense is extremely unlikely.⁷⁴ Discussions in the West about putting some kind of military pressure on Russia short of joining the armed defense of Ukraine are quite possible, however. Putin would likely want to array additional forces to end any such conversations.

Controlling the information operation to maintain justification for this operation and avoid growing international condemnation could become very challenging for the Kremlin. Images and videos of terrified, wounded, and suffering civilians would emerge despite Russia's efforts to prevent them. The overt nature of the Russian attack would complicate efforts to deflect criticism. Putin might decide that he need not care about international scorn or losing the information war. But, again, such a decision would be a rejection of a 20-year pattern of

caring very much about managing appearances to put Russia in a positive light.

If Russian forces instead charged directly into the city, they would risk becoming involved in intense urban warfare. Assuming they achieve some degree of surprise, they might shock the defenders enough to minimize the level of organized resistance. But any resistance in an urban setting can be challenging,

and attackers often resort to stand-off attacks that destroy buildings and kill civilians rather than risk their forces in close combat. The optics of Russian troops grinding through and wrecking Kharkiv could pose serious informational and diplomatic challenges for Putin and could also persuade him of the need to deploy deterrence packages of ground and air forces on Russia's frontiers.

All these objections hold true in the case of the full-scale invasion.

The advantage to Putin of conducting this more limited operation on its own is that it would allow him to concentrate more combat power on this single problem rather than dispersing it among many separate axes of advance. It might allow him more latitude to pull back or accept a more limited gain than he had initially sought, as in COA 1c (establishing a land bridge between Rostov and Crimea), although that is less plausible. The scale of the force Putin would need to send on this mission and the informational effect of attacking a large Ukrainian city would make retreat or acceptance of more limited gains much more problematic than was the case with the drive down the Azov Sea coastline.

This scenario is thus the least likely as a standalone operation, although it remains possible.

The inevitable delay of days or weeks as the Russians waited for the city to capitulate would give NATO and the international community time to rally.

Evaluation of COA I and Sub-COAs Ic through Ie

A bright line separates overt Russian deployments into Belarus and Donbas from a Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine, whether limited or full. NATO and the international community would very likely accept the first two cases with token protests, possibly limited additional sanctions, and possibly the provision of some limited additional lethal aid to Ukraine. But Russian troops have already been in Belarus, and the Russian air force already has a permanent position there openly.⁷⁵ NATO military planners and the political leaders of eastern NATO states would be concerned about the military-strategic implications of the Russian deployment, but the deployment would not be so great a departure from the current situation as to be likely to trigger fundamental change in the alliance's attitude toward Russia. The same observations hold in Donbas. Russia denies that it has troops currently in Donbas, but everyone knows that it does. Any Western outrage will likely be accompanied by commentary dismissing any overt Russian deployment into the region as "not really a major change."

We do not advocate passivity in response to these moves. Either or both of these COAs would change the geostrategic situation on NATO's eastern flank in important ways and merit serious responses that go beyond diplomatic processes. The preceding paragraph merely lays out our view of the likely NATO response to either COA.

Imagining what a full-scale Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine would look like is one of the biggest challenges in the current policy discourse. Many leaders and analysts likely underestimate the changes such an attack could trigger in Western and global attitudes and decision-making. Words on paper and abstract discussions ignore the emotional impact of pictures, videos, and sounds. The full-scale invasion

of unoccupied Ukraine would be a global crisis of the first order. It would be the largest conventional war since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. It would be a far more complicated military undertaking than either US war with Iraq and involve fighting for and probably in several cities of a million people or more. The world would see videos of long tank and mechanized vehicle columns moving along multiple axes with Russian aircraft bombing cities and Ukrainian military positions. It would almost certainly cost tens of thousands of lives and generate yet another large migration crisis. It would likely rivet the world's attention on Russian aggression and brutality as few events have done before.

The pressure on Western leaders to act would likely grow steadily as Russian forces either encircled Ukrainian cities and sought to force them to capitulate through brutal campaigns causing humanitarian catastrophe or fought through those cities, wrecking them in the process and sending millions of Ukrainians fleeing. The United States would likely follow through on some of its threats to impose high levels of economic pain on Russia. NATO would likely deploy additional military forces to its easternmost members and publicly recommit to their defense—a development

Putin explicitly seeks to avoid. A coalition of the willing would likely increase defense aid to Ukraine and might even engage militarily in limited ways. Considering this scenario today, in peacetime, when it is only a scary hypothetical, we are more likely to underestimate the Western reaction than to overestimate it.

Every single one of these likely Western reactions undermines a core geostrategic objective Putin is pursuing. The movement of forces of the western NATO states to the east and the commitment of

A bright line separates overt Russian deployments into Belarus and Donbas from a Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine.

those states to defending their eastern partners would undo the progress Putin has made in driving a wedge through the alliance. A US commitment to defending threatened NATO states would undo progress Putin has made and seeks to expand in dividing the United States from its European allies. The shock effect of Putin ripping off the mask and hurling tank columns overtly in a large-scale invasion might well reduce the will of Ukrainians and their allies to fight, but the images of Russian armor ripping through Ukraine and the devastation wrought on Ukraine's cities and people would be burned indelibly into the minds of Ukrainians, other former Soviet states, and the West. That experience would permanently harm future Russian hybrid war efforts and strip the veneer off much of Putin's cherished deniability for his actions.

There is precedent for this assessment. Russian operations in 2014 fundamentally altered Western perceptions of Putin and transformed the Ukrainian scene. This kind of invasion would almost certainly generate a much greater example of that phenomenon.

An overt invasion of unoccupied Ukraine, especially on the massive scale outlined in the leaked plan, would throw away the approach Putin has pursued and improved on for two decades and launch Russia into a new mode of interacting with the world. Putin

himself might prefer that mode, although he has never given any sign of it. But he would be putting himself at a disadvantage that he and his military often recognizes. Once Russia becomes primarily a conventional threat that has to operate mainly on the conventional plane it must confront its almost insurmountable economic and demographic disadvantages. Moving onto that plane invites NATO to see that fact clearly and take appropriate countermeasures. Putin could mitigate that risk in various ways, including by increasing his threats of nuclear war or cyberattack, but he would have severely damaged his ability to continue making gains at very low cost and entered the realm of high-risk, high-cost options. These reflections are the basis of our assessment that Putin is unlikely to pursue this conventional option in a straightforward manner, at least as long as the threat of invasion alone supports other plausible ways for him to pursue his objectives.

Considering this scenario today, in peacetime, when it is only a scary hypothetical, we are more likely to underestimate the Western reaction than to overestimate it.

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