
President Putin's Rationality and Escalation in Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Prominent Western policy figures, including British Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#), Canada's United Nations Ambassador [Bob Rae](#), and retired U.S. National Security Advisor General [H. R. McMaster](#), have recently questioned whether Russian President Vladimir Putin has become "irrational." (In contrast, Israeli Prime Minister [Naftali Bennett](#) said he found Putin to be "not conspiracy theorizing or irrational" in his meeting with him on March 5.) Some have questioned whether Putin is so mentally unbalanced that he might escalate his invasion of Ukraine into a third world war or even a nuclear holocaust.

But "rationality" is a word that gets stretched for rhetorical effect. To understand whether Putin is likely to attack a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member-state or use nuclear weapons, it is helpful to consider a standard social science definition of rationality. Doing so provides confidence that Putin is unlikely to escalate the war horizontally into NATO territory or vertically beyond conventional weaponry unless some kind of miscalculation occurs. The problem for the United States and NATO is to concentrate on crisis management and avoid inadvertent escalation.

Understanding Rationality

Social scientists never fully agree on anything, and it is not surprising that they have written dozens of books and journal articles on how to define rationality. All human brains have computational limits and built-in biases that make "[bounded rationality](#)" (a term coined by the late Herbert A. Simon) a better real-world description in any case.

What many of these social science definitions have in common are three basic tenets: (1) a rational actor has a set of goals and acts on them; (2) the actor's goals are more or less consistently prioritized over time; and (3) the actor does a fairly complete search for information before taking action.

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Vladimir Putin's Goals

For a very long time, Putin has had two overwhelming high-priority goals.

First, like any authoritarian leader, Putin's primary goal must be to stay in control of Russia for as long as possible. His power is based on his ability to act as a patron to his many clients: to dole out opportunities for wealth, provide protection to his allies, and punish those who threaten his inner circle. All leaders in personalistic systems like Russia's inevitably provoke jealousy and hatred among those who are excluded from rising, and Putin's own protection would vanish as soon as he lost the ability to protect and reward others.

Second, Putin aspires to go down in history as the man who made [Russia great again](#), after what he perceives as Russia's humiliation by the United States and the West following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This broad achievement-oriented goal encompasses most explanations for Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, even if analysts disagree about which one is correct: that he truly believes Russia and Ukraine are [one country](#) that should be reunited, or that he wants to reestablish the [Russian Empire](#) or the [Soviet Union](#), or that he simply wants to [stop further NATO enlargement](#) in its tracks.

The desire for great power status also explains Putin's actions beyond Ukraine. It explains why Putin directly intervened on Bashar al-Assad's behalf in the Syrian civil war, making Russia a [necessary player](#) in Syria's future while gaining new air and naval bases for Russian power projection elsewhere. It similarly explains Putin's use of the [Wagner Group](#) in a variety of African countries, again to become a necessary player in supporting authoritarian regimes while picking up new military bases along the way. Beyond feeding Putin's ego, great power restoration would also help him attain his first goal by solidifying his reputation as a uniquely powerful, popular, and indispensable leader.

A Poor Pre-Invasion Search for Information

Despite these well-prioritized goals, Putin seems to have had astonishingly poor intelligence in the leadup to his decision to invade Ukraine. It is here, then, that his actions do not fit the definition of rationality outlined above. We have no way of knowing, of course, whether various Russian defense and intelligence agencies failed Putin by feeding him false or inadequate information that he believed to be true and complete, or whether Putin himself chose not to ask the right questions, or to ignore facts presented to him because they didn't fit his preexisting beliefs. Perhaps, then, rather than labeling Putin an irrational individual, it would be better to call the black box of the Kremlin's information system irrational.

Putin did not understand how strong the [Ukrainian resistance](#) would be, nor that his own forces were [undermotivated](#) with inadequate [logistic support](#). We know this because the state-run Novosti news agency [accidentally published](#) an article on February 26, two days into the invasion, falsely declaring that the Ukrainian government had fallen and that Russian forces had successfully reestablished Russian unity with Ukraine. In other words, Putin apparently believed that he would have a quick and easy victory, not the hard slog his forces, in fact, faced. Putin also seems to have seriously underestimated the unity of global economic actors, led by the United States, in condemning his actions and imposing extraordinarily harsh sanctions on Russia.

There are a variety of reasons why these intelligence failures might have happened. All authoritarian states suffer from information dysfunction because messengers everywhere (including in Saddam Hussein's Iraq [before](#) the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that ended his regime) fear the personal consequences of telling leaders uncomfortable truths. While there is little public knowledge about Putin's relations with his own intelligence agencies, in Soviet times, the KGB told leaders what they [wanted to hear](#) about the politics and policies of the United States and its allies, and Soviet leaders [tended to discredit](#) KGB reports anyway and believe what they wished. Throughout his own reign, Putin has increasingly isolated himself. He appears to have consulted only a [very small group](#) of security advisors before his seizure of Crimea in 2014, excluding even the Finance Ministry. His isolation [increased](#) with the COVID-19 pandemic, and at one point, he required all visitors to undergo a [two-week quarantine](#) before meeting with him.

Rationality about Escalation

This distinction between goal-seeking and information-seeking in the definition of rationality is important in determining whether Putin is likely to intentionally escalate the war in Ukraine. There is no indication that Putin is suicidal; the only way to go down in history as the man who made Russia great again is for that future history to occur. This means that his recent statements, which some have interpreted as crazy talk, [might be](#) just that: an attempt to instill fear in his opponents by using what U.S. President Richard Nixon called in 1972 the "[madman theory](#)" of signaling, to bluff about how far he will escalate to ensure that he wins.

Putin came of age and began his KGB career in East Germany in the mid-1970s, just as U.S.-Soviet arms control efforts were stagnating and Cold War crises were heating up around the globe. He would have learned some basic understanding of the principle of mutual assured destruction, which prevents nuclear-armed superpowers from going to war with each other out of fear of the horrific consequences for both sides. He also would have been familiar from that early age with NATO's Article 5 collective security guarantee for members. Crucially, this means that Putin does not need good current information to understand the potential consequences of escalation.

The danger of the current situation is not that Putin will wantonly cross over NATO borders or climb the nuclear escalation ladder, even if he is living in a bubble. Instead, it is the possibility of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation between two rational but nuclear-armed adversaries.

What makes the danger worse is Putin's own appetite for risk-taking, something he [boasted about](#) in his autobiography. That risk-acceptance was on full display with the Russian [military shelling](#) of Europe's largest nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia. The apparent goal of the attack was to take control of the facility that provides electricity to a quarter of Ukraine, not to cause a Chernobyl-like release of nuclear materials. The operation succeeded, even as it caused a fire in an associated administrative building, and with a level of risk that had the International Atomic Energy Agency [worried](#).

Policy Implications for the United States and NATO

The more the United States and other NATO member states insert themselves directly into the conflict on Ukrainian soil, the higher the risk of miscalculation becomes. This does not mean that no risks should be taken. Indeed the crippling sanctions already imposed on Russia are very risky, as Putin [noted](#) when he said that they "are akin to a declaration of war but thank God it has not come to that." The [supply of weapons](#) to Ukraine across the borders of Poland and other NATO members will also become progressively riskier if Russian forces continue to move west. At some point, Russia may be tempted to interdict those supply lines, and an inadvertent crisis might occur if a stray Russian mortar or missile landed beyond the Ukrainian border on NATO territory.

This means that the risks of every new policy move by the West must be extraordinarily carefully thought-out, calibrated, and red-teamed in advance. It helps that a new hotline for Ukraine was established between the Pentagon and the Russian Defense Ministry, designed to [prevent](#) just such inadvertent miscalculation from happening. But the proposal by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, supported by a [number of prominent Western actors](#), to create some kind of a no-fly zone over Ukraine would dramatically increase the chances of direct confrontation between Western and Russian aircraft and air defense systems, and hence the chance of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. It would do Ukraine no good whatsoever to have this war expand into a new European world war or nuclear war.

Instead, Ukraine has the best chance of surviving if the West stays strong and united and focuses on helping Ukrainian fighters and civilians with as much creativity and foresight as possible. The fact that Ukraine has accomplished so much up until now with Western support has infuriated Putin, but his fury is not likely to lead to intentional self-immolation. It is a miscalculation, not madness that the United States and NATO must guard against.

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