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For Russia and the US, in Ukraine their highest properties are at stake

The piece below is by [Critisticuffs](#), our partner organisation in the UK. It explains the ambitions of both Russia and the US in the war in Ukraine and beyond. It is also [available](#) on their website.

Everyone is of course against war, not least political leaders and pundits, whether of the right, centre or left, whose commitment to peace is beyond question. This wholehearted antipathy for bloodshed typically stands firm, right up until it does not. The Stop the War Coalition, however, did not transform its coalition to stop wars into a coalition to stop a Russian victory in the current war. When putting forward their position, they made a connection between NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders (cf. Appendix) and Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

“NATO should call a halt to its eastward expansion and commit to a new security deal for Europe which meets the needs of all states and peoples.” — [Stop the War Statement on the Crisis Over Ukraine](#). 18 Feb 2022

The Labour Party generally disagreed with that line of reasoning and its leader declared:

“Russian tanks sit, engines revving, on the verge of annexing Ukraine, but protest placards waved here by the usual suspects condemn Nato, not Moscow. Any equating of the right of a sovereign nation to determine its own future, even to exist, and the vicious aggression of a neighbour is an intellectual sham. To do so is not merely misguided: it is morally wrong.” — Sir Keir Starmer. [Under my leadership, Labour's commitment to Nato is unshakable](#). 10 Feb 2022

Paul Mason took it upon himself to argue this point:

“Progressives should abandon the delusion that this crisis has been triggered by Nato's 'encirclement' of Russia.” — Paul Mason. [The left must stand with Ukraine against Putin's aggression](#). 22 Feb 2022

The anarchists at Freedom News agree:

“Or, the worst: [the Westerners] want to explain to me how this is a NATO created conflict, or, if they happen to feel more generous, they come up with some kind of ‘both sides to blame’ rhetoric.” — Zosia Brom. [Fuck leftist westplaining](#). 4 Mar 2022

What is remarkable about these rebuttals is that they do not disagree in substance with the claim that this is not “merely” a war between Russia and Ukraine, but a conflict between NATO and Russia:¹

1. Sir Keir Starmer: “But to condemn Nato is to condemn the guarantee of democracy and security it brings, and which our allies in eastern and central Europe are relying on, as the sabre-rattling from Moscow grows ever louder.”
2. Paul Mason: “But this crisis goes far beyond Ukraine: Putin’s goal is to destabilise the West. He’s made great strides towards that goal already. His subversion efforts in the US are echoed nightly on Fox News; Joe Biden’s presidency looks increasingly weak; the European Union is divided; and Nato itself is uncertain over what to do next.”
3. Zosia Brom: “But when you say ‘Fuck NATO’ or ‘End NATO expansion’, what I hear is that you do not care about the safety and wellbeing of my Eastern European friends, family and comrades.”

That is, NATO must protect at least its eastern members against Russia (Brom), NATO is protecting democracy and security across eastern and central Europe against Russia (Starmer) or Russia is destabilising the entire West including, somehow, the US presidency (Mason).

These defenders of Ukrainian sovereignty identify correctly that much more than Ukraine is at stake for the involved war parties. It is a war about the European peace order, fought between the mightiest war alliance² in human history³ on the one side and the only military power in the world capable of confronting it in an all-out war on the other side. What upsets these patriots about the hippies and Leninists in the Stop the War coalition is their treacherous lack of support for the troops, a crime against war morality:

“That’s why the likes of the Stop the War coalition are not benign voices for peace. At best they are naive; at worst they actively give succour to authoritarian leaders who directly threaten democracies. There is nothing progressive in showing solidarity with the aggressor when our allies need our solidarity and – crucially – our practical assistance, now more than ever.” — Sir Keir Starmer. [Under my leadership, Labour’s commitment to Nato is unshakable](#). 10 Feb 2022

What Starmer and his fellow travellers want is for their audience to cross their fingers for the right side in this slaughter. In a sense, this is absurd: waving protest placards in the UK condemning Moscow would do little to sway Putin. Indeed, as has been documented in e.g. 2003, not even the British state feels particularly impressed by anti-war protest placards being waved by the usual suspects. Yet, as much as Starmer’s, Mason’s and Brom’s interventions may be driven by a genuine moral conviction that does not depend on the utility of their demand, at least for Starmer the whole

endeavour is not useless. What Starmer is after, as the Prime Minister hopeful that he is, is a population willing to accept cutbacks and hardships in support of the war effort.⁴ When “our allies [need] our practical assistance now more than ever”, the population should accept its cost as a dividend of war morality. For the Stop the War coalition the matter is an equally moralistic one. In identifying NATO’s role before the Russian invasion, they wish to break the enthusiasm for this war. This earns them the scorn of the informal coalition of the willing quoted above.

However, identifying the role NATO and especially its leader, the US, plays in this conflict does more than merely answering which side to support in the slaughter. It also teaches you why, for both Russia and the US, nothing less than their respective status in the world is at stake. The people of Ukraine find themselves at the sharp end of this battle for status, a status for which the US and Russia are willing to displace, maim and kill Ukrainians, and a status for which they are willing to risk nuclear war. Given this, we recommend abandoning the business of crossing fingers for states and their wars.

1. Russia’s Status Quo and Ambition

The perspective of the Russian state on the role of NATO in this war is clear. In his televised address declaring the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin explained that he sees NATO’s eastward expansion as nothing less than a matter of life and death for the Russian state:

“Any further expansion of the North Atlantic alliance’s infrastructure or the ongoing efforts to gain a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory are unacceptable for us. Of course, the question is not about NATO itself. It merely serves as a tool of US foreign policy. The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile ‘anti-Russia’ is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons.

For the United States and its allies, it is a policy of containing Russia, with obvious geopolitical dividends. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation. This is not an exaggeration; this is a fact. It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty. It is the red line which we have spoken about on numerous occasions. They have crossed it.” — Vladimir Putin. [*Televised Address on Ukraine*](#). 24 Feb 2022

For the avoidance of doubt, the *situation* he is describing here is not disputed by Russia's foes.

1. The centrality of Ukraine's NATO membership (or Ukraine as a NATO deployment zone) to this war is echoed by Ukrainian president Zelensky:

“Security guarantees and neutrality, the non-nuclear status of our state — we're ready to do that. That's the most important point ... they started the war because of it”, Zelensky said.” — Max Seddon, Andres Schipani and Polina Ivanova. [Volodymyr Zelensky says Ukraine ready to discuss neutrality in peace talks with Russia](#). 28 Mar 2022

2. The strategic importance of Ukraine to Russia's security interests has been expressed numerous times by Western strategists, e.g.:⁵

“It cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire. American policymakers must face the fact that Ukraine is on the brink of disaster: the economy is in a free-fall, while Crimea is on the verge of a Russia-abetted ethnic explosion. Either crisis might be exploited to promote the breakup or the reintegration of Ukraine in a larger Moscow-dominated framework. It is urgent and essential that the United States convince the Ukrainian government, through the promise of substantial economic assistance, to adopt long-delayed and badly needed economic reforms. At the same time, American political assurances for Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity should be forthcoming.” — Zbigniew Brzezinski (US National Security Advisor 1977 to 1981). [The Premature Partnership](#) in *Foreign Affairs*. Mar 1994.

“Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.” — William Burns, now CIA director. Quote from 2008 cited in [The Making of Vladimir Putin](#) in *New York Times*. Mar 2022.

3. The increased integration of the Ukrainian military into NATO is well documented, e.g.:

“Despite remaining a nonmember, Ukraine grew its ties with NATO in the years leading up to the 2022 invasion. Ukraine held annual military exercises with the alliance and, in 2020, became one of just six enhanced opportunity partners, a

special status for the bloc's closest nonmember allies." — Jonathan Masters. [Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia](#). Apr 2022.

"At their meeting in Warsaw on 9 July 2016, the Heads of State and Government of the NATO-Ukraine Commission endorsed a Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine. The CAP supports Ukraine so that it can better provide for its own security, and carry out essential reforms in the security and defence sector. This includes objectives set out in the 2016 Strategic Defence Bulletin (SDB) towards adopting NATO standards and achieving interoperability with NATO forces by 2020." — [NATO's Support to Ukraine](#). Nov 2018

Moreover, before the Russian invasion, the US and NATO had made clear what retaliation they were planning in response. Namely: unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia aimed at crippling its economy, and thus society, as well as material – but for now not uniform-clad – support for the Ukrainian war effort. In other words, when invading, Russia was aware it would engage in a proxy war with NATO and the US that risks the transition to an all-out war. When Putin emphasises the Russian claim to Ukraine by declaring it “our historical land”, i.e. in the way patriots make moral claims, and when he speaks of a “matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future”, he means it.

Yet, his idea of “life and death” is not the literal survival of Russia as a sovereign nation. There are many countries in the world that exist outside of NATO without being threatened in their existence. What is at stake for Russia is its place as a great power in the world, capable of demanding respect for its interests from the US. This is what Putin means by “our historical future as a nation”. To him and other patriots, the distinction between the survival of a nation and its rightful place in the world is rather academic. His great nation deserves respect and success.

In some naive sense, an end to the conflict is easy to achieve. All Russia needs to do is not even to completely demilitarise but merely to abandon its status, ambition and means of being a nuclear power capable of confronting the US. If it were to accept a place as a “regional power” it could be welcome within a US-led world order.

Alas, it is, however, correct when peace activists like Noam Chomsky emphasise that:

“No Russian leader, no matter who it is, could tolerate Ukraine, right at the geostrategic center of Russian concerns, joining a hostile military alliance.” — Noam Chomsky. [After Dangerous Proxy War, Keeping Ukraine Neutral Offers Path to Peace with Russia](#). Mar 2015.

But as much as Chomsky can find reason in Putin's actions, it should not be forgotten that what we are talking about here are the calculations of patriots who are willing to kill thousands if not millions of citizens and foreigners so

that their nation receives the appropriate respect in the world, to further its interests, and the success that comes with it. The peace movement's well-meaning attempts to clear up the silly notion that Putin is a "[madman](#)", by explaining the "legitimate security interests" or "geostrategic concerns" of the Russian state, fail to account for the madness of patriotism: an ideology prepared to commit mass murder for the glory, strength and success of the fatherland. This holds true for Russia, but it also holds true for the US and its junior NATO partners like the UK.

2. The US' Status Quo and Ambition

One thing you can rely on with former US President Trump is that he speaks plainly:

"We recognize that weakness is the surest path to conflict, and unrivaled power is the most certain means of defense." — Donald Trump. [Speech outlining the US National Security Strategy](#). Dec 2018

2.1. Unrivalled Power

Lest he be accused of going off script, the strategy he was introducing speaks the same language:

"The Department of Defense's enduring mission is to provide combat-credible military forces needed to deter war and protect the security of our nation. Should deterrence fail, the Joint Force is prepared to win. Reinforcing America's traditional tools of diplomacy, the Department provides military options to ensure the President and our diplomats negotiate from a position of strength.

[...]

The costs of not implementing this strategy are clear. Failure to meet our defense objectives will result in decreasing U.S. global influence, eroding cohesion among allies and partners, and reduced access to markets that will contribute to a decline in our prosperity and standard of living." - Jim Mattis, US Secretary of Defense, et al. [Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America](#) (NDS'18). 2018.⁶

In its opening statement (the summary of) the US National Defense Strategy does away with the fantasy that contrasts military conflicts with diplomacy. Diplomacy relies on military might, which - in turn - exists to enable diplomacy to succeed. Somehow, the lingering threat of superior violence provides the conditions for successful negotiations. On this basis then, international treaties about anything from commerce to culture can be agreed upon. This is how influence, cohesion, access to markets and

prosperity are accomplished and how other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions can be decisively influenced.⁷

In this arena, the US has attained a might that is *almost* unrivalled in the world. Its military is currently capable of waging and winning a war, nuclear or conventional, against any other power in the world *bar one*:⁸

“The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.

[...]

Concurrently, Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor. The use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine is concern enough, but when coupled with its expanding and modernizing nuclear arsenal the challenge is clear.” - NDS'18

The authors identify the central challenge to everything important to them, i.e. the strength of the US economy and US national security. This challenge is posed by powers whose transgression is wanting to revise the status of the US as the unquestionable victor of history. The concern of these powers for their “prosperity and security” and their strategies in the world to secure them are not worth discussing or even acknowledging. Rather, in designating their programme in the world as to “shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model” their interests are declared as motiveless: power for the sake of power. What remains of their actions in the world is purely negative: aggression without cause.

In this respect, the US Secretary of Defense and his coauthors do not diverge from the Sir Keir Starmers, Paul Masons and Zosia Broms of this world. The National Defense Strategy allows itself enough ideological flourish to brush aside and declare illegitimate the security interests of its foes. However, since the US military does not only want to rally support for a war against Russia but aims to win it, it has more to say on what allows Russia to defy US pressures and thus why Russia presents a key challenge to the US, i.e. Russia's nuclear arsenal:

“The ICBM force [the US [intercontinental ballistic missiles](#) carrying nuclear warheads, CC] is highly survivable against any but a large-scale nuclear attack. To destroy U.S. ICBMs on the ground, an adversary would need to launch a precisely coordinated attack with hundreds of high-yield and accurate warheads. This is an insurmountable challenge for any potential

adversary today, with the exception of Russia.” — Office of the (US) Secretary Of Defense. [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR'18). Feb 2018⁹

2.2. Escalation Dominance

The US military has identified that no adversary can pose a challenge to its weapons of mass destruction except Russia. While somehow popular discourse has it that these weapons exist to preserve the peace, the US military helpfully clears up this misconception, too: The point of the US nuclear arsenal is not to prevent war, but to wage it; anywhere and against anyone:

“The nuclear deterrent underwrites every U.S. military operation on the globe—it is the backstop and foundation of our national defense and the defense of our allies.” — US Department of Defense. [Nuclear Modernization: Ensuring a Safe, Secure, Reliable, and Credible U.S. Nuclear Deterrent](#). Apr 2019.

This is not only meant as some general insurance against some far-off doomsday but also rather immediately. What the US is aiming for here is to dominate the escalation of any conflict, anywhere. They aim for an absolute, consistent escalation dominance, the ability to never be pressured by an adversary to react but to be in a position to dictate the terms of a conflict. The aim is that there is no level of escalation through which adversaries of the US can achieve some victory, as explained by a coauthor of the National Defense Strategy:

“The United States consequently needs a new warfighting approach adapted to this threat. This new warfighting approach involves U.S. forces resisting Chinese or Russian attacks from the very beginning of hostilities, fighting in and through enduringly contested operational environments to first blunt Beijing or Moscow’s assault and then defeat it – without ever gaining the kind of all-domain dominance that the United States could establish against Iraq or Serbia. With its invasion blunted or readily reversed, neither China nor Russia would have a way to end the war favorably; rather, Beijing or Moscow would face the awful choice of expanding the war in ways that play to U.S. advantages or swallowing the bitter but tolerable pill of settling on terms the United States can accept.” — Elbridge A. Colby. [Testimony Before The Senate Armed Services Committee. Hearing on Implementation of the National Defense Strategy](#). Jan 2019.

To understand this, it is useful to recap the classifications of war by military strategists:¹⁰

1. **Conventional war** refers to a war where the war parties confront each other with soldiers, tanks, ships and aircraft, but they do not use weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. The US military is unrivalled in this category.

2. **War with tactical weapons of mass destruction** such as tactical or sub-strategic nuclear weapons. Here weapons of mass destruction are used to defeat the enemy in the theatre of war. In this category, Russia can compete with the US.
3. **War with strategic weapons of mass destruction** such as strategic nuclear weapons. Here weapons of mass destruction are used to harm the enemy in their home country, cities and regions are devastated and destroyed. Sufficiently many strikes wipe out an entire country. In this category, Russia can compete with the US.

The boundaries between these categories are fluid. For example, [cluster bombs](#), [thermobaric weapons](#) and [depleted uranium ammunition](#) represent a transition towards tactical weapons of mass destruction used in conventional war. This fluidity can be used to escalate a conflict gradually or, in response, as a justification for a steeper escalation.

Wherever in the world a conflict with Russia or China arises, the US wants to be able to confront and hold off their respective military. While the US military cannot dominate these armies as it could in Serbia or Iraq, US war planners are somewhat confident in their strength on that level. What worries them about Russia (and China) is that it might have the option to escalate either to tactical nuclear strikes on the battlefield or to an all-out strategic exchange of nuclear warheads. Or, the US cannot threaten this escalation against Russia without having to fear a matching response. The challenge with Russia is that the US lacks unrivalled power on two levels: the US is not able to wage a “strategic” or a “sub-strategic” nuclear war “in ways that play to U.S. advantages”. It cannot always produce a situation where the only choice for Russia is to escalate without much hope of success or to concede to the US’ demands. As a consequence, the US has to consider Russia’s interest in every one of its military operations, wherever they are: Does this represent a red line for Russia? Is this a key ally?

For example, when Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war in support of the government, this represented a real limitation to what the US military and its allies could do in this conflict. More generally, this represents a limitation in the strategic freedom to wage those wars deemed necessary to protect US global influence, cohesion among allies, access to markets, prosperity and standard of living.

This is what they mean by “deterrence”: Ideally their own forces of destruction are so vast at the next level up that war at the current level can be won successfully. Superior strategic nuclear weapons ought to underwrite that a tactical nuclear war abroad can be won without significant harm to the homeland, superior tactical nuclear weapons ought to underwrite that a conventional war can be won without having to accept significant counterstrikes. In this category of conventional weapons the US military is vastly superior to its foes and thus is confident in its ability to win any such war.

2.3. Taking Stock: Strategic Nuclear War

At its height in the 70s and 80s, the peace movement had a slogan: “You cannot win a nuclear war”. The US agreed and agrees that it indeed could not win a war against then the Soviet Union, and now Russia, and has been working on remedying this regrettable situation. On this strategic front, the US military is currently not overly ambitious. It does not aim to make the US immune to attacks from Russia but merely to ensure that its nuclear and conventional weapons can devastate Russia before it can take out the US nuclear arsenal:

“The United States must have an NC3 [Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications, CC] system that ensures command and control of U.S. nuclear forces at all times, even under the enormous stress of a nuclear attack. NC3 capabilities must assure the integrity of transmitted information and possess the resiliency and survivability necessary to reliably overcome the effects of adversary nuclear attack.” — NPR’18

On the one hand, they plan on “reliably overcom[ing] the effects of adversary nuclear attack”. That is, in the logic of these military strategists whatever death and destruction the other side is capable of inflicting, the key challenge is to be able to wipe them out regardless. The dream for these strategists is, of course, to be able to destroy the Russian nuclear arsenal before it hits the US. On the other hand, for the time being, US strategists have to concede that they are still too vulnerable to the Russian nuclear arsenal:

“The problem with this approach [to ‘develop forces of all kinds able to hobble Russia’s or China’s nuclear arsenal’, CC] is that it is simply too difficult to pull off and is therefore an obvious bluff.” — Elbridge A. Colby, coauthor of the National Defense Strategy. [*If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War*](#). Nov 2018.

2.4. Taking Stock: Tactical Nuclear War

As explained above, the scenario envisioned by these war planners is that confronted with a lack of victory using conventional weapons, Russia (or China) might resort to tactical nuclear strikes on a battlefield outside of US territory rather than accept defeat.

“Moscow threatens and exercises limited nuclear first use, suggesting a mistaken expectation that coercive nuclear threats or limited first use could paralyze the United States and NATO and thereby end a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. Some in the United States refer to this as Russia’s ‘escalate to de-escalate’ doctrine. ‘De-escalation’ in this sense follows from Moscow’s mistaken assumption of Western capitulation on terms favorable to Moscow.” — NPR’18

To thwart this threat of a Russian nuclear escalation on a battlefield abroad, the US could try to rely on the threat of its strategic nuclear weapons aimed at Russia (an approach favoured by some strategists in Washington). However, as mentioned above, Russia might call this “bluff” given that its own strategic arsenal is capable of inflicting mass destruction in the US.

Thus, dissatisfied with progress in establishing the superiority needed to make a civilisation-ending war mostly one-sided, enhanced tactical nuclear weapons in the hands of the US military ought to ensure that no escalation can benefit Russia. That is, the answer of US strategists, of course, is to attain superiority in this category of weapons as well. The US was lagging behind here, something the Nuclear Posture Review 2018 set out to fix:

“To address these types of challenges and preserve deterrence stability, the United States will enhance the flexibility and range of its tailored deterrence options. U.S. strategy does not require non-strategic nuclear capabilities that quantitatively match or mimic Russia’s more expansive arsenal. Rather, the United States will maintain a spectrum of capabilities sized and postured to meet U.S. needs, and particularly to ensure that no adversary under any circumstances can perceive an advantage through limited nuclear escalation or other strategic attack.” — NPR’18

At the same time, the US reserves the right to tilt the balance in its own favour on any battlefield by use of nuclear weapons:

“To help preserve deterrence and the assurance of allies and partners, the United States has never adopted a ‘no first use’ policy and, given the contemporary threat environment, such a policy is not justified today. It remains the policy of the United States to retain some ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances that might lead to a U.S. nuclear response.” — NPR’18

A researcher for the German Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, no relation)¹¹ analyses this as follows:

“Credible extended deterrence to protect allies and partners should deter potential adversaries from strategic (conventional and nuclear) attacks (pre-war deterrence). If this fails, the effectiveness of deterrence is to be restored through selective nuclear strikes (intra-war deterrence). To this end, the USA reserves the right to be the first to use nuclear weapons to force an end to the war on acceptable terms. The essential prerequisite for this is the escalation dominance of the USA.

[...]

Thus, NPR 18 suggests that a use of nuclear weapons to protect allies below the threshold of strategic destruction risk is possible and controllable. This would make it possible to end a war on tolerable terms.” — Wolfgang Richter. [Erneuerung der nuklearen Abschreckung](#) in *SWP-Aktuell* 15. Mar 2018. our translation.¹²

Indeed, reporting on the challenge of Russia’s and China’s apparent readiness to deploy tactical nuclear weapons, the already cited coauthor of the National Defense Strategy gets all envious:

“The risks of nuclear brink-manship may be enormous, but so is the payoff from gaining a nuclear advantage over an opponent. Nuclear weapons are, after all, the ultimate trump card: if you can convince your enemy that you have a way to play the card and are actually prepared to go through with it, nothing is more powerful. And the best way to do that is to have palatable options for the limited and effective use of nuclear weapons. Americans should know: they perfected this approach against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

[...]

The Pentagon’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review recognized this gap [the lack of tactical nuclear weapons for a war against Russia or China and thus for US nuclear brinkmanship, CC]. It committed to modernizing its air-delivered tactical bombs and developing low-yield nuclear warheads for submarine-launched ballistic missiles.” — Elbridge A. Colby. [If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War](#). Nov 2018.

Those are quite some strategic freedoms to dream of, while, of course, “it would only be a rhetorical question of how many ‘sub-strategic’ nuclear weapon strikes a ‘frontline state’ can survive” (Wolfgang Richter. [Erneuerung der nuklearen Abschreckung](#) in *SWP-Aktuell* 15. Mar 2018. our translation).¹³

2.5. NATO’s Eastward Expansion

It remains the US military’s dream to be able to destroy Russian strategic nuclear warheads on the ground, by launching a precisely coordinated attack with hundreds of high-yield and accurate warheads. The quicker these warheads hit their targets – Russian cities and military installations – the more likely they destroy Russia’s capabilities to do the same.

This can be achieved either by having faster rockets or by stationing them closer to Russia. Here, the US has a strategic advantage over Russia. While Russian missiles need to cross an ocean to hit the US and can otherwise only threaten the US’s allies, in stationing nuclear and other weapons in Europe, the Russian territory is within quicker reach of US weapons:

“The United States will make available its strategic nuclear forces, and commit nuclear weapons forward-deployed to Europe, to the defense of NATO. These forces provide an essential political and military link between Europe and North America and are the supreme guarantee of Alliance security. Combined with the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, as well as Allied burden sharing arrangements, NATO’s overall nuclear deterrence forces are essential to the Alliance’s deterrence and defense posture now and in the future.” — NPR’18

For example, NATO aircraft are stationed in Tallin, 350 kilometres from Saint Petersburg.¹⁴ Also, US MK-41 missile launchers, which are (reportedly) capable of launching both interceptor missiles and nuclear warheads, are stationed in Romania and (soon) Poland; the interceptor missiles provide the shield needed to launch a US attack. Officially, these were meant to defend against Iran but, for example, the previously cited SWP researcher Wolfgang Richter does not seem to quite buy the Pentagon’s line:¹⁵

“Moscow rejects the accusation of a breach of the [[Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\)](#), CC] treaty and accuses the USA of having violated the INF Treaty. For example, they used medium-range ballistic missiles to test the missile defence system. In addition, they used the navy's Mk 41 SLCM [sea-launched cruise missiles, CC] launchers on land, namely in missile defence sites in Romania and soon also in Poland (Aegis ashore). From there, future GLCMs [ground-launched cruise missile, CC] could be launched against targets in Russia. This option is explicitly mentioned in NPR 18. Washington, on the other hand, insists that the Aegis-ashore systems are only suitable and intended for launching defensive missiles. In order to dispel the mutual accusations, mutual information and inspections would be necessary. To this end, the INF inspection regime, which ended in 2001, would have to be reactivated and modified.” — Wolfgang Richter. [Erneuerung der nuklearen Abschreckung](#) in *SWP-Aktuell* 15, our translation¹⁶

Such missiles (in Ukraine) are a concern raised by Russia in its treaty proposal with NATO before the invasion.¹⁷ On the one hand, unnamed US officials signalled their openness to discuss a restriction on the number of such missiles.¹⁸ On the other hand, Biden’s official line is to deny any plans of deploying offensive missiles. Finally, as mentioned in the quote above, these launchers are land-based versions of standard sea-based cruise missile launchers that regularly patrol the Black Sea aboard NATO ships.¹⁹

Of course, all of these forward-deployed weapons provide options not only against the Russian heartland but also sub-strategic options against Russian (and other) targets in the broader region, as demonstrated with conventional warheads by both sides:

“The capabilities of conventional SLCM (sea-launched cruise missiles, CC) were demonstrated by two American Aegis warships on 7 April 2017, when they attacked the Syrian airbase of Sayrat from the Mediterranean Sea.

[...]

On the other hand, Russia has compensated for this geostrategic disadvantage by equipping the flotilla in the Caspian Sea with SLCMs. When Russia intervened militarily in the Syrian war in September 2015, it launched conventional SLCMs from there and demonstrated their effectiveness on the southern periphery.” — Wolfgang Richter. [*Erneuerung der nuklearen Abschreckung*](#) in *SWP-Aktuell 15*, our translation²⁰

2.6. Peace in our Time

Again, in some naive sense, an end to the hostilities is easy to achieve. All the US has to do is to abandon its ambition of “unrivalled power”, to let go of the aim of attaining a situation where no other country in the world could sustain an all-out war against it, to let go of the demand that no other country can negotiate from a similar “position of strength”.

Yet, riffing off Noam Chomsky, we can say that no American leader, no matter who it is, could tolerate this.²¹ Such are patriots everywhere that they weigh the cost of millions of lives against their standing and success in the world. To them, the prize – Russia ceasing to be a challenge to US power – is so great, that it is worth risking the lives of many. Before Russia’s invasion, the US’s commitment to Ukrainian territorial integrity was not particularly strong.²² However, Russia’s only moderate military success in Ukraine convinced (at least some in) the West that further steps in the long-term project of neutralising Russia as a formidable foe are possible:

“We want to see Ukraine remain a sovereign country, a democratic country able to protect its sovereign territory. We want to see Russia weakened to the point where it can’t do things like invade Ukraine” — Lloyd Austin (US defence secretary), cited in [*US pledges extra \\$713m for Ukraine war effort and to weaken Russia*](#). 25 Apr 2022

“According [to] Ukrainska Pravda sources close to Zelenskyy, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Boris Johnson, who appeared in the capital almost without warning, brought two simple messages.

The first is that Putin is a war criminal, he should be pressured, not negotiated with.

And the second is that even if Ukraine is ready to sign some agreements on guarantees with Putin, they are not.

Johnson's position was that the collective West, which back in February had suggested Zelenskyy should surrender and flee, now felt that Putin was not really as powerful as they had previously imagined, and that here was a chance to 'press him.'" — Roman Romaniuk. [Possibility of talks between Zelenskyy and Putin came to a halt after Johnson's visit - UP sources](#). 5 May 2022

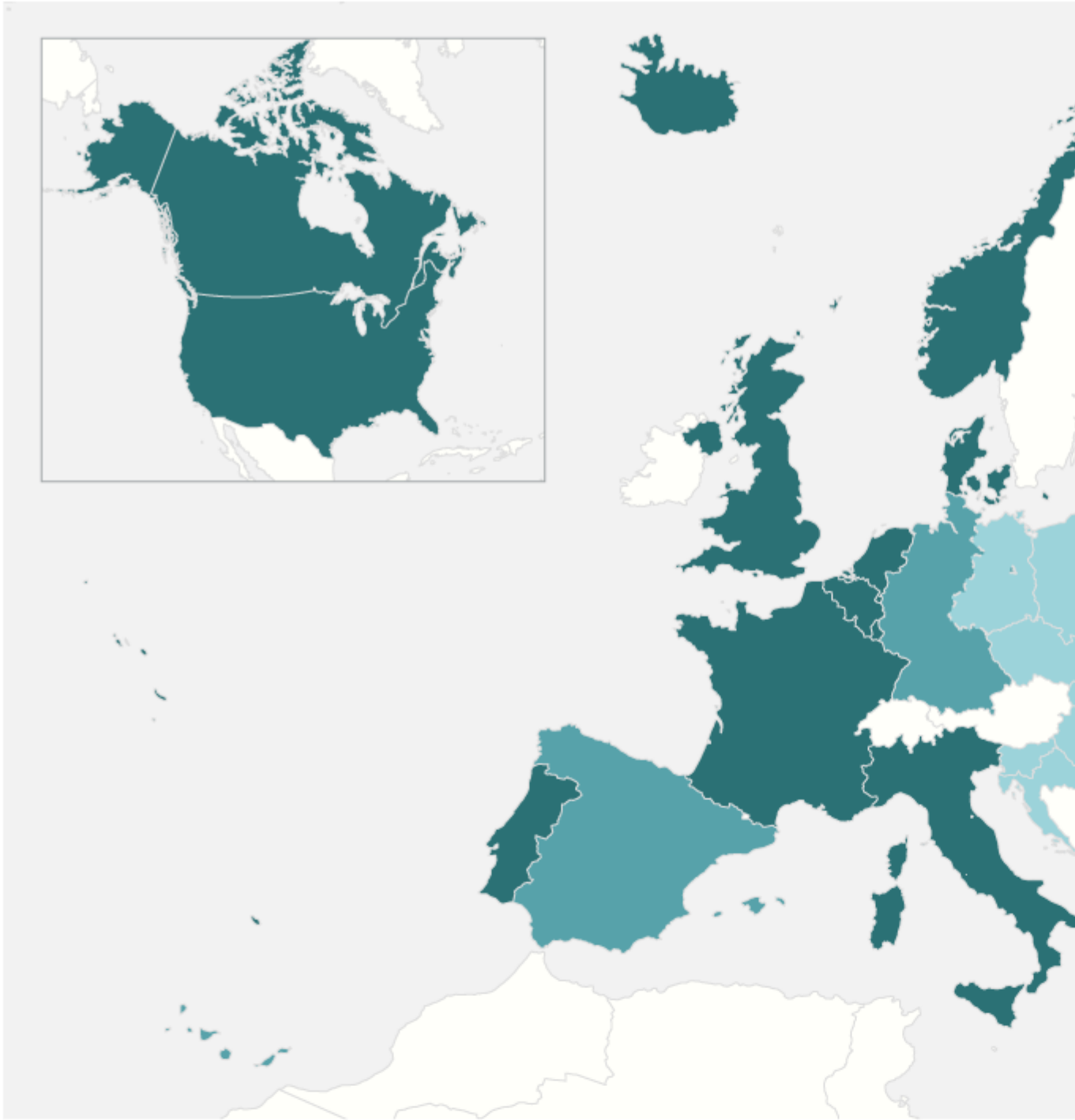
For Russia and the US, what they are and claim to be as nations is at stake: for the one, its "historical future as a nation", its status as a great power and respected subject in the world of states; for the other, its "unrivalled power", its unrestricted world domination. Their positions are irreconcilable. They do not tolerate any relativisation, because that would be tantamount to abandoning their posited standpoint.

For both sides, the assertion of their own position, therefore, has the quality of an existential question that must be brought to a decision, a "matter of life and death" and or a matter of the highest principles - "prosperity and security" - respectively.

And so they go at each other. They both use deterrence and threats to impress the other side into accepting their demands and escalate the use of their means of destruction when this fails. They know full well what destruction the other side can bring to the battlefield, and how widely it can define this battlefield. They both insist on their dominance of escalation, their ability to up the ante in response to an escalation of the other side. For now, Russia made the transition to an all out war against Ukraine and kills people in that country to preserve its status as a great power. The superior American side, for now, does not want to get directly involved with its military - indeed it seems increasingly frustrated that it has to take attention away from its rising (economic and thus future military) rival China. For now, America is content with letting Ukrainians fight and die - for their fatherland²³ and the rule-based order that the US implemented after the Second World War. But America's restraint is nothing but the decision to postpone an escalation to the point when it feels its status as the one superpower in the world is sufficiently threatened.

Only an idiot would support either of these programmes.

3. Appendix: NATO's Eastward Expansion



● **Founding members**

- 1949 Belgium
- 1949 Canada
- 1949 Denmark
- 1949 France
- 1949 Iceland
- 1949 Italy

● **Cold War expansion**

- 1952 Greece
- 1952 Turkey
- 1955 West Germany
- 1982 Spain

1 See also [“If you want peace, prepare for war” \(Russia, Ukraine, NATO, EU\)](#).

2 The Parties to the NATO Treaty “are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security.” ([The North Atlantic Treaty](#))

3 “Nato has proved such a powerful security alliance because it pools military capacity, capability and cash, with an annual budget of more than \$1 trillion to protect one billion people.” (John Healey, Labour Shadow Defence Secretary. [Britain’s leadership in Nato is under threat](#). 25 Apr 2022)

4 “We will face economic pain, as we free Europe from dependence on Russian gas and oil. And clean our institutions from money stolen from the Russian people. But the British public have always been willing to make sacrifice to defend democracy on our continent, and we will again.” (Sir Keir Starmer. [Keir Starmer’s statement to Parliament on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine](#). 24 Feb 2022)

5 It would be a mistake, though, to [accuse the prosecution of hypocrisies](#) just because US military strategists warned about Russia’s red lines concerning Ukraine, something Stop the War stresses now. As Sir Keir Starmer made clear, his objection is to a moral failure to support the own side in this war, something US strategists can hardly be accused of.

6 Note that a [2022 version](#) was submitted to the US Congress, but an unclassified version is not yet available.

7 See also [What is Imperialism?](#)

8 The other big rival identified in the NDS is China, but here we focus on Russia, for obvious reasons. We wrote *bar one* because the challenge of China’s military might is projected somewhat into the future: “As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future. The most far-reaching objective of this defense strategy is to set the military relationship between our two countries on a path of transparency and non-aggression.” The US Nuclear Posture Review (cited below), too, is explicit about there being only one power challenging the US’ nuclear arsenal.

9 A [2022 version](#) was submitted to the US Congress, but no unclassified version is available yet.

10 We are neither nuclear nor conventional war experts and hope we never will be. Thus, we mostly rely on the work done by others here. In particular, our discussion of the American military strategy is mostly based on [Die amerikanische Weltmacht treibt die Entmachtung ihres russischen Rivalen voran](#) by GegenStandpunkt published in Autumn 2019 and the sources cited therein.

[11](#)“The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (German: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik; SWP) is a German think tank in international relations and security studies. A semi-official organization with close links to the federal government” ([Wikipedia](#))

[12](#)“Eine glaubwürdige erweiterte Abschreckung zum Schutz von Alliierten und Partnern soll potentielle Gegner von strategischen (konventionellen und nuklearen) Angriffen abhalten (pre-war deterrence). Falls dies nicht gelingt, soll die Wirksamkeit der Abschreckung durch selektive Atomschläge wiederhergestellt werden (intra-war deterrence). Dazu behalten sich die USA vor, als erste Kernwaffen einzusetzen, um ein Ende des Kriegs zu akzeptablen Bedingungen zu erzwingen. Die wesentliche Voraussetzung dafür ist die Eskalationsdominanz der USA. (...) So suggeriert die NPR 18, ein Kernwaffeneinsatz zum Schutz von Alliierten unterhalb der Schwelle des strategischen Vernichtungsrisikos sei möglich und kontrollierbar. Dies erlaube es, einen Krieg zu erträglichen Konditionen zu beenden”.

[13](#)“Dann wäre es nur noch eine rhetorische Frage, wie viele ‘substrategische’ Kernwaffenschläge ein ‘Frontstaat’ überleben kann”

[14](#)“Consequently, the United States will maintain, and enhance as necessary, the capability to forward deploy nuclear bombers and DCA (dual-capacity aircraft, i.e. bombers that can carry conventional and nuclear weapons, CC) around the world. We are committed to upgrading DCA with the nuclear-capable F-35 aircraft. We will work with NATO to best ensure—and improve where needed—the readiness, survivability, and operational effectiveness of DCA based in Europe.” (NPR'18)

[15](#)Declaring “MK-41 missile launches” as offensive weapons was considered “[fake news](#)”, i.e. enemy propaganda, at least as long as the INF treaty was in effect. While this will likely make little difference to some, here we avoid relying on Russian or Western “anti-imperialist” media. A “trick” we recommend to our readers and that we deploy here, though, is to not only consider the media/statements of the two main opponents, i.e. Russia and the US, but also of their allies. In particular, the German government and its advisors have a somewhat different take on the strategic freedom sub-strategic nuclear weapons afford the US.

[16](#)“Moskau weist den Vorwurf des Vertragsbruchs zurück und bezichtigt seinerseits die USA, den INF-Vertrag verletzt zu haben. So hätten sie ballistische Mittelstreckenraketen eingesetzt, um die Raketenabwehr zu testen. Zudem verwendeten sie die SLCM-Abschussgeräte Mk 41 der Marine auch an Land, nämlich in Raketenabwehrstellungen in Rumänien und bald auch in Polen (Aegis ashore). Von dort aus könnten künftige GLCM gegen Ziele in Russland gestartet werden. Auf diese Option wird in der NPR 18 ausdrücklich hingewiesen. Dagegen betont Washington, die Aegis-ashore-Systeme seien nur für den Abschuss von Abwehrraketen geeignet und vorgesehen. Um die gegenseitigen Vorwürfe auszuräumen, wären wechselseitige Informationen und Inspektionen notwendig. Dazu müsste das 2001 beendete INF-Inspektionsregime reaktiviert und modifiziert werden.”

[17](#)“Article 6: The Parties shall undertake not to deploy ground-launched intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles outside their national

territories, as well as in the areas of their national territories, from which such weapons can attack targets in the national territory of the other Party. Article 7: The Parties shall refrain from deploying nuclear weapons outside their national territories and return such weapons already deployed outside their national territories at the time of the entry into force of the Treaty to their national territories. The Parties shall eliminate all existing infrastructure for deployment of nuclear weapons outside their national territories. The Parties shall not train military and civilian personnel from non-nuclear countries to use nuclear weapons. The Parties shall not conduct exercises or training for general-purpose forces, that include scenarios involving the use of nuclear weapons.” ([\(Draft\) Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees](#). Dec 2021).

[18](#)“The officials said the administration would be open to discussions with Russia on curtailing possible future deployments of offensive missiles in Ukraine and putting limits on U.S. and NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe.” (US News, [US Hones Warnings, Offers to Russia Over Ukraine](#). Jan 2022)

[19](#)“Additionally, in the near-term, the United States will modify a small number of existing SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile, CC) warheads to provide a low-yield option, and in the longer term, pursue a modern nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM). Unlike DCA, a low-yield SLBM warhead and SLCM will not require or rely on host nation support to provide deterrent effect.” (NPR’18)

[20](#)„Die Fähigkeiten konventioneller SLCM demonstrierten zwei amerikanische Aegis- Kriegsschiffe am 7. April 2017, als sie vom Mittelmeer aus den syrischen Luftwaffen- stützpunkt Sayrat zerstörten. (...) Andererseits hat Russland diesen geostrategischen Nachteil kompensiert, indem es die Flottille im Kaspischen Meer mit SLCM ausrüstete. Als Russland im September 2015 militärisch in den Syrienkrieg eingriff, hat es von dort aus konventionelle SLCM gestartet und ihre Wirksamkeit an der südlichen Peripherie demonstriert.“

[21](#)In the UK, a country whose nuclear arsenal is nowhere near that of the US, Sir Keir Starmer’s predecessor as the leader of Her Majesty’s Most Loyal Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, indicated his unwillingness to entertain this calculus: killing millions in retaliation for an attack on the UK. This (among other things) made him unelectable and earned him a [threat of a coup d’état](#).

[22](#)“Administration officials have suggested that the U.S. will press Ukraine to formally cede a measure of autonomy within its eastern Donbas region, which is now under de facto control by Russia-backed separatists who rose up against Kyiv in 2014.” (Ellen Knickmeyer, Matthew Lee and Nomaan Merchant. [Biden assures Ukraine’s leader of US support to deter Russia](#). Dec 2021)

[23](#)See [Stop conflating Ukraine and its inhabitants](#).