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By International Crisis Group

Avoiding an Even Worse Catastrophe in Ukraine

With the war in Ukraine grinding on, Western governments should pursue a strategy that raises costs to Russia while urgently exploring the contours of a negotiated solution. Such an approach is imperative to halt Ukraine's decimation – and to ward off the gravest threat of nuclear confrontation in decades.

As large-scale war in Ukraine enters its fourth week, Western governments backing Kyiv are balancing several imperatives. On one hand, they must support Kyiv as it resists a Russian invasion that is destroying much of the country and raise the costs of aggression to Moscow. On the other, they have to minimise risks of the war spiralling into a wider confrontation between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a scenario both sides have worked for decades to avoid because of the possibility that it could all too easily turn nuclear. A third factor is no less important. The longer the war lasts, and the higher the human toll, the harder it will be for the West to leave room for a negotiated solution and the graver the risks of escalation. Western governments should not aim for a complete, but likely unattainable, victory that includes a return to the pre-2014 status quo and war crimes investigations, let alone Russian President Vladimir Putin's departure. Their main objective should rather be an agreement that both sides can accept and that will bring the war to a close.

This objective should inform all of Western governments' actions with respect to the war. With weapons supplies to Ukraine, they should aim to help its resistance hold off Russia's assault long enough that Moscow accepts a settlement that is as palatable to Kyiv as possible. Western leaders should, as they have done so far, avoid tactics – like a no-fly zone – that would be tantamount to war with Russia. Sanctions should aim to encourage a negotiated deal and, as far as possible, constrain Moscow; this requires communicating to the Kremlin that a settlement acceptable to Kyiv will mean an end to at least some of the restrictions crippling Russia's economy. Open lines of communication with Moscow remain vital, both for testing options for a deal between Russia and Ukraine and for signalling NATO's own red lines, averting as best possible miscalculation by Moscow and managing incidents.

A Terrible Toll

The war has confounded expectations to date. Most analysts – Ukrainian, Russian and Western – expected Russia's larger, better-equipped army to rapidly overcome Ukraine's smaller numbers. Instead, Russian forces turned out to be ill prepared and quickly demoralised, while Ukrainian soldiers and civilians have been far more determined and resourceful than Moscow appears to have anticipated. Ukraine has also used Western-supplied anti-tank weapons, air

defences such as Stinger missiles, ordnance and body armour to dash Russian hopes of an easy win. Russian forces are having difficulty seizing and holding territory. Their advance from the north is long stalled; those in the east and south are encountering significant Ukrainian push-back. Ukraine's information campaign of visual evidence of abandoned or destroyed Russian equipment and stories of Ukrainian heroism has been extremely effective with Western audiences, if less so in some other parts of the world.

In the face of Ukraine's resistance, Russia has turned to ever more brutal tactics. At first, Moscow seemingly sought to avoid civilian casualties in the expectation of a friendly reception by Ukrainians. Now Russian forces are bombarding cities and towns, killing and maiming thousands of civilians. Their record in Chechnya (within Russia itself) and in Syria gives good reason to fear that the civilian toll could get much worse.

The West's response, unprecedented in both unity and scope, appears to have taken the Kremlin aback almost as much as Ukraine's resilience. Having spent the weeks leading up to the attack working to avert the war through diplomacy, once Russian tanks were rolling, Western states shifted gears fast, pivoting to a strategy of maximising the invasion's costs to Russia. They have imposed severe sanctions, sent substantial supplies of weapons and other aid to Kyiv, and worked to isolate Russia on the international stage. In this way, the U.S., the European Union (EU) and their allies made good on the threats they issued prior to the invasion and arguably have gone further, inspired in part by the fierce struggle Ukrainians themselves have put up.

As weapons shipments have helped Ukrainians slow Russia's battlefield advance, Western policies have rendered Russia the most sanctioned country worldwide and wreaked havoc on its economy. The U.S., the EU, the UK, Japan and other countries banned national banks from doing business with the Russian Central Bank and put in place sanctions on a number of major Russian banks, seven of which were cut off from the SWIFT financial transactions system. Western countries froze $300 billion of the Russian Central Bank's $640 billion in reserves, which led to a sharp decrease in the ruble's exchange rate. The U.S. and EU also blocked the flow of cash dollars and euros to Russia and constrained that of potentially dual-use technologies and electronic chips. The U.S. and UK have banned imports of Russian oil and gas, while the EU has proscribed steel product imports. Finally, international payment systems such as Visa, Mastercard, American Express and JCB have disconnected from all Russian banks.

Many Russians have already felt the pinch. They can no longer pay with bank cards abroad, cannot easily withdraw cash from foreign currency accounts and face steep inflation, particularly for foreign-made goods. More than 300 foreign companies have left Russia, ceasing their production, services and sales. International shipping and logistics companies and foreign ports are also refusing to work with Russia. All these steps will both increase unemployment and worsen commodity shortages in the Russian domestic market. The EU's plans to wean itself off Russian hydrocarbons, if carried out, will also hit the Russian economy hard. Already, grocery stores are rationing staples, such as flour and sugar.

Ukrainians are, of course, paying the heaviest price. As Russia's assault razes buildings, city blocks, villages and towns, over three million refugees have fled the country. These are overwhelmingly women, children and the elderly: men between the ages of eighteen and 60 are allowed to exit Ukraine only in rare circumstances. (As Crisis Group has separately noted, how much this policy – which adds family separation and heightened risks to war's trauma – helps Ukraine defend itself is unclear.) Millions have also fled within Ukraine, to the western part of the country, where shelling is less, though Russian strikes have hit the western city of Lviv, where many of the displaced have taken shelter, suggesting that could

change. Those who stay in cities under fire face shortages of food, water and heat. Especially shocking are images from the southern port city of Mariupol, whose civilians are trapped under bombardment that increasingly recalls Russia's levelling of Grozny in Chechnya and Aleppo in Syria, and have been forced to bury the dead in mass graves. On 16 March, airstrikes destroyed a theatre in Mariupol that was reportedly sheltering hundreds of civilians and was marked with the Russian word for "children" in letters that could be seen from the air.

Neither side shows any sign of backing down or giving up. Direct negotiations between representatives of Moscow and Kyiv have yet to include the senior-level negotiators needed to conclude a deal. Neither those talks nor shuttle diplomacy by French, German, Israeli and Turkish leaders have revealed much moderation in Moscow's stance or much overlap between Russian and Ukrainian positions. True, there are minor indications of movement. Ukrainian leaders, including President Volodymr Zelenskyy, say Russia's positions have become more "realistic". Zelenskyy has also indicated that while the country will continue to seek EU admission, he may stop asking to join NATO – a long-stated red line for Moscow. As for Russia, the Kremlin may have dropped its demand that Ukraine "denazify", which is to say remove Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, from power, along with his government. But Moscow continues to insist on its sovereignty over Crimea, which it annexed in 2014, and the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics within their Soviet-era borders, that is, three times more territory than that held by Russia-backed separatists as of 23 February. It still demands Ukraine's neutrality and demilitarisation, though perhaps would be flexible about what that means were other aspects of a deal in place. While it is positive that talks continue, they have thus far yielded little concrete benefit. Even some of the humanitarian corridors agreed upon by negotiators have failed, as evacuating civilians found themselves instead under Russian fire or travelling through mined areas.

Avoiding the Escalation Trap

As the West piles more assistance into Ukraine, Russia has pushed back with threats, both tacit and explicit. The most jarring of these involves nuclear menacing, playing on NATO's desire to avoid escalation. President Putin early on threatened outside actors with "consequences far greater than any of you have faced in history" if they intervened in Ukraine – a barely veiled nuclear threat – but left vague what actions would cross the line. He also announced that his deterrent forces would henceforth operate under a heretofore unknown alert status (which, in the end, appeared to amount to dispatching more personnel to already well-staffed command centres). Russia held nuclear exercises after the invasion was under way (the U.S., by contrast, cancelled a scheduled drill to avoid unintended signalling). Putin and other Russians (including Moscow's permanent representative to the UN Security Council) have, meanwhile, alleged with no evidence that Ukraine was developing nuclear capabilities or had plans to use chemical or biological weapons, raising fears that Russia may seek a pretext to use such weapons itself and point the finger at Ukraine.

Beyond nuclear threats, the Kremlin has also declared that NATO weapons supplies are legitimate targets, though what it means by this warning is unclear. For now, it is sticking to targets in Ukraine rather than risk an attack on NATO territory and the response that could invite, although it may seek to engineer deniable accidents and otherwise disrupt supply efforts in countries staging weapons deliveries. On 13 March, Russia bombed the Yavoriv military training site in western Ukraine, only 20km away from the Polish border. The site has

symbolic importance – in that NATO member state officers had trained Ukrainian soldiers there in years past – but was not actually a supply depot or a Western facility, suggesting either bad intelligence or restraint.

As for Western leaders, they have largely walked a line between imposing the sorts of costs that they threatened in an effort to deter the war (sanctions, arms supplies to Ukraine and troop build-ups on Russia's western flank) and taking steps that might cause the war to spin beyond Ukraine. These leaders have stated clearly that they do not intend to fight Russia directly, because doing so could lead to broader war pitting nuclear-armed states – Russia, on one side, and three NATO members (the U.S., the UK and France) on the other – against each other.

But as the war grinds on, pressure is mounting for a stronger Western response. The sheer numbers of displaced, images of Ukrainian suffering and growing evidence that Russian military operations – perhaps not intentionally but certainly with insufficient care – are doing tremendous harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure have deepened sympathy for Ukraine, particularly in NATO and EU countries. Having won enormous public admiration for his courage under fire, Zelenskyy has appealed directly to the U.S. Congress and other Western legislatures – broadcasting in fatigues from war-torn Kyiv – and implored the West to become directly involved. He and other Ukrainian officials continue to press NATO countries to "close the sky" over Ukraine – alluding to the imposition of a no-fly zone that would likely put Western and Russian forces in combat with each other, and which Western officials have wisely taken off the table. But civil society groups, parliamentarians and opinion leaders throughout the West increasingly echo Kyiv's calls for more help and the intensive media coverage ensures that the topic remains in the public eye.

Those promoting a stronger Western line offer several arguments to bolster their case. Some hold that the moral imperative of helping Ukraine, whose civilians are dying under Russian bombardment, should make Western capitals less risk-averse. Some argue that if Russia is not stopped in Ukraine, its appetite for aggression elsewhere, including against NATO member states, will only grow. Others believe that the risk of nuclear use by the Kremlin is in any case difficult to predict and manage, especially given that Moscow sees itself as at war with the West already. Still others hold that it is the Kremlin that will back down if faced with the risk of war with NATO.

What these arguments share is an uncomfortable element of guesswork and wishful thinking. While the Ukraine conflict triggering a nuclear confrontation might appear unfathomable, given the consequences of such a war, measures that invite a direct battle between Russia and NATO would run a perilous risk of just that. Throughout the Cold War, Russia and the U.S. avoided direct clashes precisely because of fears that the danger of a struggle turning nuclear would be unmanageable. While debates have long raged over whether, in fact, a conventional war between the two sides could be contained, with terror of nuclear annihilation restraining either or both, policymakers have historically erred on the side of caution.

This logic remains as valid today as it was then. While some elements of Moscow's current nuclear strategy are intentionally ambiguous, and President Putin's choices are his own, Russia does have a stated doctrine for possible nuclear weapon use. This doctrine allows that Russia may use nuclear force in the event of nuclear, chemical or biological weapon attack on itself or its allies; if it faces conventional aggression that threatens the very existence of the state; if it is under ballistic missile attack; or if there is a risk to its nuclear command and control capabilities.

A conventional war with NATO could too easily fall within this framework. For Moscow, a war with NATO would be inherently existential. The alliance's military capacity dwarfs Russia's – as the latter's struggles in Ukraine vividly illustrate – and could do the country

tremendous damage. Once the fight is under way, it would be tough if not impossible to convince Kremlin officials that NATO's aims are limited. Moscow would expect the alliance, if only for its own defensive reasons, to both hit targets inside Russia and take early steps to eliminate the Russian capacity for a nuclear strike. It would also assess NATO's goals in a war as including regime change – an impression that can only be exacerbated by Western rhetoric calling for Putin to be deposed by coup or assassination or discussions of putting him and members of his inner circle on trial for war crimes (reinforced recently when U.S. President Joe Biden called his Russian counterpart a war criminal). Such calculations could push Russia toward using nuclear weapons while it can, as the only possible way to force NATO to back down. It is not hard to see that action provoking a harsher, potentially nuclear, NATO response, as the alliance, too, tries to demonstrate resolve.

What Now?

So how should Western powers balance potentially competing imperatives – punishing and deterring aggression, on one hand, and avoiding profoundly dangerous escalation on the other – as the war proceeds? Thus far, they are largely on the right path but it is important they bear in mind the purposes of each tool they are already or considering using.

The conventional arms that the U.S. and NATO partners have supplied are appropriately helping Ukraine resist Moscow's assault; the goal of these transfers should be to improve Kyiv's position and allow it to negotiate more palatable terms to end the war with Russia when both parties are truly ready for talks. The escalatory risks that these transfers present thus far seem limited, while the difference they make is crucial. A steady supply of portable air defences such as Stingers, and potentially some heavier missile batteries, would help Kyiv maintain the superiority it now enjoys in the sky over government-controlled Ukraine. Armed drones will continue to be valuable, including as anti-artillery systems. Maintaining a flow of ammunition for all of these capabilities, as well as body armour and personal weapons for the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians now under arms, is possibly the most important thing Ukraine's partners can do.

At the same time, Western weapons provision needs to minimise the risk of direct engagement with Russia. Enforcing a no-fly zone, for example, would require militarily engaging Russian aircraft and potentially taking out Russia's own air defences, including on Russian territory. It would, in other words, be an act of war. NATO would also be sensible to refrain from transferring equipment that would require the presence of member state personnel to service it – as might be the case with fighter jets that some Western officials suggest providing – as they could then be in the line of fire.

Minimising risks of escalation also means finding ways to convey to Russia the dangers of overstepping NATO's own red lines and heading off, to the extent possible, Moscow's potential miscalculations. The Kremlin appears to have badly misjudged how Western governments would respond to (and Ukrainians resist) its invasion. That experience should, in principle, leave Moscow somewhat chastened and more cautious. Western leaders should, however, still do their part to make clear what actions they see as crossing their own red lines. They might even leverage the reality that they, themselves, cannot perfectly predict their reactions. Even as the Kremlin reminds the world of its nuclear arsenal, Western capitals can remind Moscow that in the event of certain Russian actions, their responses may be difficult to control. Chemical weapons use, for example, would inevitably bring Russia's further isolation, but it may also set off an inexorable march toward NATO military action. Already, members of

the U.S. Congress are among those arguing that such tactics should trigger direct Western involvement. Pointing these statements out to Moscow might help it understand the danger.

As for the unprecedented sanctions and other political and economic pressure on Russia, these should also be part of a policy that aims to end the war through a deal and, as best possible, gives Moscow incentives to de-escalate. For now, Western leaders appear to hold out divergent hopes of what sanctions will achieve. They should clarify their goals and adjust their policies accordingly.

Western leaders' expectations of sanctions' impact inside Russia need to be realistic. They cannot count on economic penalties to end the war by turning Russia's public or elite against it. Indeed, sanctions may well harden many Russians' positions and increase, rather than decrease, support for the invasion and Putin himself. The Kremlin is long practiced at deflecting antipathy for sanctions against the Western governments enforcing them. A draconian Russian government crackdown on free speech and protest that has already led tens of thousands to flee the country also diminishes prospects for mass unrest in opposition to the war. Sanctions and a failing military campaign may turn elites against the war, and it is perhaps not completely inconceivable that they motivate some form of palace coup. But that is a long shot, not a reasonable assumption for planning. Besides, the more that Kremlin officials believe that Western policy in Ukraine aims to provoke their overthrow, the likelier they are to view the war as existential, potentially triggering even greater violence, increasing the risks of war with NATO and putting compromise further beyond reach. Constraining Moscow's ability to prosecute the war by shrinking its economy has a more compelling logic. In that sense, sanctions do have value, if paired with continued global diplomacy to maintain pressure on Moscow. But simply weakening Russia will not end the war, at least not quickly.

More important is for Western governments to use the limited leverage that sanctions offer to best effect. Too often they fail to do so because of a reluctance to lift restrictions unless maximalist demands are met; they should not repeat that mistake this time around. If the aim is peace in Ukraine, the right message to send to Moscow, however unsatisfactory it might seem, is that a deal Kyiv accepts will yield a measure of sanctions relief. In the war's aftermath, such relief will not return Russia's economy to its prior state, particularly if the Kremlin maintains its harsh domestic policies. Many firms and investors will continue to avoid the country for some time, if nothing else because they will distrust its markets. Nonetheless, the restoration of foreign payment systems and lifting of blocking sanctions against some Russian banks could help partly restore the Russian financial system's normal functioning.

As for the nature of a deal that would lead to those steps, Western capitals should, broadly speaking, take their cue from Kyiv. A ceasefire alone would not be enough, as it would leave large numbers of Russian forces on Ukrainian soil with a continuous risk of the shooting starting again. (Indeed, a pause in fighting could enable Russia to resupply its troops.) But a ceasefire coupled with verifiable Russian withdrawals might appropriately trigger some sanctions relief. Ukraine's Western partners should also be willing to consider other outcomes that seem suboptimal – Ukraine regaining control of the self-declared republics in Donbas, for example, but in effect accepting the loss of Crimea – if Kyiv itself swallows such an arrangement, with all its attendant problems. A deal that puts in place a process for resolution of the Donbas question over time, although it would be fraught, would also be worth considering, notwithstanding the deadlock in Donbas negotiations over recent years. Ukraine's full demilitarisation seems out of the question, but Russian-Ukrainian conventional arms control could limit both sides' deployments in border areas. Kyiv has already spoken of eschewing

pursuit of NATO membership. As NATO is not planning to invite Ukraine to join, it should be ready to accept this step. As for the EU, Ukraine may also need to propose a relationship that falls short of membership, particularly as that organisation, too, seems unlikely to enlarge any time soon.

Lastly, Western leaders need to keep open lines of communication to Moscow, both to make their red lines as clear as possible and do whatever they can to promote an end to the war. The shuttle diplomacy of the leaders of France, Germany, Israel, Turkey and others, although seemingly not immediately effective, could lay the groundwork for compromise later. Ideally, open channels would include military-to-military links, so as to better protect against misunderstandings – whether related to the supply of weapons or NATO's troop build-ups along the alliance's eastern flank – blowing up.

Conclusion

For now, Western governments have largely charted the right course in their response to Russia's invasion, factoring in risks of escalation even while helping Ukraine fight back. But the moment is extraordinarily dangerous. Not only is the war destroying Ukrainian cities, forcing millions from their homes and potentially upending Europe's security architecture. It also pits one nuclear power against a smaller neighbour backed by other nuclear powers, with only murky red lines separating nuclear-armed states from direct confrontation. After at least a decade of worsening bad blood between Russia and the West, and as understandable outrage mounts in Western capitals at Russia's aggression and Ukraine's suffering, that bulwark is hardly reassuring.

Some caution still guides calculations on both sides, with Western leaders sensibly rejecting a no-fly zone and Russia thus far not targeting weapons convoys outside Ukraine itself. But the room for miscalculation is frightening, particularly if the Kremlin again misreads the mood in Western capitals. How bad things get depends largely on President Putin himself. But Western leaders can make their own red lines and their own domestic pressures as clear as possible and do everything within their power to create incentives for a settlement. Keeping doors open to ending the conflict is not just about stopping Ukraine's decimation. It is about stepping back from a standoff that poses the gravest threat of nuclear confrontation for at least half a century.