



Statement

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# War in Europe: Responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

*Russia's assault on Ukraine threatens to become the largest European conflict in decades. A vigorous but judicious Western and global response is critical to limit the damage.*

In a chilling act of aggression, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a military assault on Ukraine in the early hours of 24 February. That Western leaders had warned of this possibility for weeks did little to cushion the shock. President Putin announced what he characterised as a “special military operation” to demilitarise and “denazify” Ukraine, and made a barely coded threat of nuclear strikes upon any outside power that might come to its aid. Residents of Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, and cities throughout the country woke to explosions as Russian bombs and missiles fell on military facilities and infrastructure. The bombardment follows a months-long build-up of as many as 200,000 Russian troops on Ukraine’s borders, to the north, west and south. Ground forces that then entered Ukraine indicate that Russia has embarked upon not only an air campaign aimed at toppling Ukraine’s government but a full-scale invasion. The human toll could be catastrophic.

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sometimes honoured in the breach – has underpinned global affairs since World War II. The rest of the world, and not just the Western powers who thus far have been most vocal, now needs to do what it can to limit the damage. While the available steps may seem small given the scale of what President Putin is doing, and cannot turn back the clock or by themselves reverse Russia’s aggression, a demonstration of unity and imposition of costs by outside powers represent the best hope of bringing the region, and the world, back toward a more stable order:

- The first task for Western powers and their partners – one that is well under way – is to take the steps they had warned Moscow’s military escalation would provoke. That means rolling out the full sanctions packages they have promised, including against financial institutions, Russian officials, and business leaders, while avoiding steps that unnecessarily harm average Russian citizens, such as visa bans. NATO and its members should also continue to build up forces on the alliance’s eastern flank. They should also keep supporting Ukraine with weapons and other assistance. At the same time, though diplomacy holds little promise in the days ahead, they should keep the door open no matter how bad things get.

- Non-Western powers should make their voices heard, following the example of Kenya's permanent representative to the UN, whose powerful intervention before the Security Council on 21 February called Russia out for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. They should make clear the reputational costs of Moscow's war of aggression. Russia's friends, especially China – which for the moment appears, regrettably, to have cast its lot with Putin's plan – should take stock of what this disruptive act will cost them politically and economically. To the extent they can pressure Russia to reverse course, they should do so.
- The UN and others should take urgent steps to help Ukraine prepare for the war's probable humanitarian fallout. Large-scale displacement and emergency medical needs are likely. Russia itself will surely be required to host large numbers of refugees, for which it does not seem to have prepared. Humanitarian agencies should, with donor support, prepare for the worst. More for reputational purposes than because their outcry is likely to be effective, other international bodies should do what they can to demonstrate their

opprobrium. The UN General Assembly or Human Rights Council should establish a fact-finding mechanism to collect evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses in the present fighting and any occupation that may follow.

In reality, though, how horrific things get mostly depends on decisions taken in the Kremlin. Moscow faces not only the sanctions and NATO troop build-ups that Western powers will now undertake, but also prospectively fierce Ukrainian resistance that it seems to have discounted, potentially immense costs to its global reputation and the need to convince its public that this war on a neighbouring country in which many Russian citizens have relatives and friends is truly crucial to national security. Seemingly isolated, angry and set on his dangerous path, President Putin may be beyond reaching. Pivoting to the pursuit of a negotiated settlement could still lead to real reductions of forces in Europe and would do much more for Russian security than war in Ukraine. For now, though, that appears a distant hope. Those who oppose Moscow's aggression need to raise the costs to Russia and prepare for what could be a long and difficult struggle.

## A Slow, then Rapid Escalation

Russia's bombardment marks a dramatic escalation in a war it has waged against Ukraine since 2014. Back then, protests supporting closer links to the European Union led to the ouster of a pro-Moscow president. Russia, which saw a Western hand in both the unrest and Kyiv's new government, annexed the Crimean peninsula and sent weapons and personnel to support separatists in the eastern Donbas region. Two ceasefire deals signed in 2014 and 2015 – the Minsk accords – brought an end to the worst of the fighting and left separatists in control of about a third of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where they proclaimed the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR).

The Minsk deals laid out a roadmap for peace and reintegration of the separatist-controlled regions under an undefined "special status". Moscow saw the deals as a way to force Kyiv to absorb its proxies into a confederation, in which separatist-controlled entities would exercise a veto over any major decision. Kyiv had no inclination to move in this direction, and faulted Moscow for failing to withdraw weapons and forces, as the Minsk deals also stipulated.

Moscow's preparations for this latest phase of the war stretch back to at least the spring of 2021. Increasingly frustrated with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who came to power in 2019 having campaigned on promises of peace but refused to implement the

Minsk agreements on Russia's terms, Moscow deployed near Ukraine's border what looked like the beginnings of an invasion force. It subsequently pulled back many troops though it left infrastructure in place. A second build-up began in the autumn of 2021, this time with greater numbers of soldiers and with deployments on new fronts, including Belarus in the north and Crimea in the south.

The deployments prompted a frenzy of diplomacy aimed at averting war. Western states embarked on a two-pronged diplomatic campaign – making clear, first, that any new aggression in Ukraine would be met with harsh economic sanctions and a build-up of NATO forces near Russia's borders and, secondly, that if Russian forces pulled back, Western governments were ready to negotiate new limits on activities, exercises and deployments in Europe. Moscow responded with its own demands, while claiming that Westerners were “hysterically” exaggerating its build-up. It wanted NATO and the U.S. to sign binding treaties pledging not to expand the alliance further, especially not to any more former Soviet countries; remove all military forces to countries that were already NATO members when the Soviet Union collapsed; and eschew intermediate-range missile and U.S. nuclear weapon deployments in Europe. While NATO refused to close its door to new members, Western leaders communicated to Moscow that they had no plans to allow Ukraine or Georgia to join; could mutually limit intermediate-range missile deployments, exercises and activities; and were ready to embark upon a long-deferred broader discussion about the European security architecture. They declassified and shared intelligence regarding the build-up and Moscow's plans, which appeared to include a large-scale invasion and occupation of much of Ukraine.

Weeks of negotiations and Russian troop movements continued side by side, until things

escalated in mid-February. The line of contact between separatist- and government-held territory in Donbas, which had been mostly quiet throughout the build-up, saw a sharp increase in shelling. Russian and separatist-controlled media, which heretofore had focused on denouncing Western hysteria and played down the risks of war, portrayed the fighting as the start of a Ukrainian campaign to reconquer the separatist-held territories, amid an attempted genocide of the Russian-speaking population. Ukraine, for its part, insisted that it did not start the shooting, and the Ukrainian army accused separatist combatants of shelling their own territory for propaganda purposes. Russia's genocide claims relied on doctored and out-of-context images that were easily debunked. On 17 February, the heads of the DNR and LNR announced the evacuation of their civilian populations to Rostov, in Russia, seemingly to the surprise of Rostov's governor, who indicated he had no preparations in place. By 22 February, some 90,000 refugees had arrived, according to Moscow, despite continuing gaps in availability of housing and food. The refugees are overwhelmingly women, children and the elderly. The separatists announced the mobilisation of the entire male population aged eighteen to 55 and prohibited the men from leaving.

At the same time, Russian sabre-rattling grew louder. Exercises in the Black Sea sharply curtailed freedom of movement and navigation. Moscow also held nuclear and conventional strategic deterrence forces drills, including launches of ballistic and cruise missiles on 19 February. While likely scheduled long in advance, these contributed to a sense that Russia was preparing for war. Elsewhere near the Ukrainian border, Russian forces moved ever closer, in sharp contrast to promises by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to start withdrawing troops at the end of exercises. Indeed, joint Russia-Belarus military exercises, which

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were the pretext for tens of thousands of Russian troops to gather in Belarus on Ukraine's northern flank – some 200km from Kyiv – were extended beyond their scheduled end date of 20 February, with the Belarusian Ministry of Defence citing rising tensions in Donbas. There and elsewhere, Russian troop and weapon formations grew smaller, more widely dispersed and better hidden. Satellite images showed a new pontoon bridge in southern Belarus across the Pripyat, a major river that runs parallel to the Belarus-Ukraine border, positioned to cut the route from staging positions to the Ukrainian capital by 70km.

A flicker of hope on 20 February was soon dashed. Putin and French President Macron spoke twice by telephone, and pledged to continue talks, including to facilitate a summit with U.S. President Joe Biden, who agreed to meet, subject to the condition that there be no further escalation by Russia. The next day, on 21 February, Moscow televised a visibly staged Putin-led meeting of the Russian National Security Council, convened to discuss the possible recognition of the two breakaway republics, and then broadcast Putin's speech announcing that recognition. The speech portrayed NATO as a hostile enemy bent on weakening and constraining Russia. It was marked by anti-Ukraine vitriol and rejection of Ukrainian nationhood, reaching back into history to cast

blame on Vladimir Lenin for having recognised Ukraine as a Soviet republic during the post-revolutionary period. The recognition of the DNR and LNR rendered the Minsk agreements moot. It created a pretext for Moscow to send in troops, ostensibly as peacekeepers to defend the LNR and DNR, which in Moscow's view were now empowered to consent to their presence. It also underscored Putin's dismissal of Ukraine's legitimacy as a nation-state.

As more Russian troops entered separatist-held areas, Ukraine, on 23 February, declared a state of emergency, called up reservists and passed a law allowing citizens to carry firearms and use them in self-defence. That evening, President Zelenskyy reported that his efforts to reach Putin had been in vain. Speaking Russian on his Telegram channel, he addressed the Russian people in a heartfelt plea to prevent war. Referring to Moscow's propaganda, Zelenskyy went on to ask how he, the grandson of a man who served out World War II in the Soviet infantry and died in independent Ukraine, could be a Nazi (Zelenskyy is also Jewish). Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded by saying Kremlin officials were not sure what the two presidents might discuss, though they were not opposed to talks if those could "cut the Gordian knot" of eastern Ukraine. As Russia's bombardment started, Kyiv officially broke diplomatic ties with Moscow.

## The First Day of Full-scale War

While much remains unclear, Russia appears to have begun its assault with long-range strikes targeting military and other infrastructure throughout Ukraine, including near Kyiv and other major cities across the country such as the Black Sea port of Odessa, as well as eastern industrial hubs Kharkiv, Dnipro and Mariupol. Western Ukraine was not spared, with bombs landing in the Lviv region and near Lutsk. The initial bombing may have aimed to destroy Ukraine's air defence capability, such as it was. It may also have intended to menace

Ukrainians and demonstrate Russia's massive military superiority. Already reports suggest the bombing has killed and wounded dozens of civilians.

Russian ground forces, including columns of heavy armour and artillery, then advanced from Crimea in the south and Belarus in the north, even as helicopters delivered more personnel to locations elsewhere. Numerous reports of fighting, particularly in the south, were followed by news that Russian forces had taken parts of Ukraine, including Kherson in the south, Sumy

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in the north east, and the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Hostomel airport near Kyiv changed hands at least twice. Fighting also raged in Donbas. A variety of sources presented visual evidence of casualties on both sides and prisoners of war taken by Ukraine. How long Ukrainian forces will be able to resist is simply unclear.

If Russia’s goal is a demilitarised, compliant Ukraine, as Putin’s statements and speeches indicate, it is hard to see how it can achieve this end without some element of military occupation. The deployments of Russian National Guard troops alongside offensive units to Ukraine’s borders since the start of 2022 suggest that Moscow has been preparing to occupy at least parts of Ukraine. Over time, occupation will almost surely face resistance and be enormously expensive, which may lead Moscow to try to install a surrogate government. But creating a governing authority capable of controlling a hostile population will also be costly and difficult, although Moscow may either expect – likely mistakenly – that most Ukrainians will go along or believe that the brutal methods it is prepared to deploy will cow them. It is also not clear how seriously Moscow meant its demand, late on February 24, that Ukraine surrender, and commit to both neutrality and demilitarisation. But Kyiv, which thus far is defiant, is highly unlikely to comply.

If Russia may not count on rapid Ukrainian capitulation, Putin’s refusal to talk to Zelenskyy on the evening of 23 February may indicate a Russian desire to punish Ukraine

before accepting any surrender, which would mean continued bombardments. As Russian troops move in, both the expected resistance to them and their response to it will inevitably put civilians in jeopardy. So, of course, do the bombardments.

Moreover, rumours and U.S. intelligence assessments of Russian plans for incarceration and even murder of serving Ukrainian officials and others raise concerns about potential violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in a Ukraine under Russian control. People with ties to Western organisations will likely face increased danger. So, too, will those affiliated with groups, movements and identities demonised by Moscow, such as LGBTQ+ individuals.

Beyond that, if Russia does occupy most or all of Ukraine, Ukrainians can look to some degree to what happened in the DNR and LNR for a glimpse of their future. It is likely that a Russian-occupied Ukraine would face sanctions, meaning that its economy would deteriorate. Russia’s goal is a subdued, not prosperous, Ukraine and support from Russia – whose own economy will be groaning under new sanctions – is likely to be meagre. Mass migration to parts of Ukraine not controlled by Russia, and perhaps to neighbouring states, is likely if it remains feasible. So is migration to Russia itself. Unlike in the LNR and DNR, active opposition, and perhaps even armed resistance, is certainly on the cards, though its shape and scope is hard to predict.

## Moscow’s Logic

As Crisis Group has previously noted, President Putin has chosen a path marked by risk and uncertainty for Russia. The question is not who will win the war. Ukraine is overmatched by the Russian military. But as the U.S. learned in

Iraq and Afghanistan, toppling a government and creating something viable in its place are two very different things. Installing a surrogate regime capable of controlling a hostile population absent Russian military backing will be

difficult, even if that government extends the in-terrorem tactics that Moscow appears ready to deploy to stamp out opposition to its designs. Outright occupation would be enormously expensive. The extent to which the Russian economy will be able to bear the crippling sanctions the West envisages is unknown. Mean-while, Putin’s aggressive campaign has breathed new life into NATO and provoked precisely the kind of troop build-up on its borders that he has been trying to discourage. While many non-Western countries until now have avoided strong condemnation of Russia’s belligerence, invading a sovereign country on such a flimsy pretext may do lasting damage to Putin’s inter-national standing beyond the West.

Why, then, such a dangerous move? The story told in President Putin’s speech reflects a worldview in which the eastward expansion of Western institutions is a zero-sum game that intentionally limits, weakens and aims to coerce

of its more successful tools in recent years. In Syria, Russia’s intervention turned the course of the war, propping up the Bashar al-Assad regime and placing Russia squarely in a criti-cal role. Moscow may see its 2008 interven-tion in Georgia as having helped prevent that country from aligning more closely with NATO and the EU. It may believe that only the use of force will convince Ukraine and Ukrainians that they have no choice but alignment with Russia — particularly as Western states will not ride to their rescue. As stated earlier, it may either underestimate the hostility Moscow’s policies since 2014 inspire in Ukraine outside separatist-held areas or be confident in its abil-ity to overcome resistance with blood-curdling brutality.

The tendency toward coercion may have been strengthened during the last two years as an already narrow advisory circle around Putin shrunk further due to COVID-19 precautions.

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Russia politically, militarily and economically. As Putin said, even if Ukraine is not on track to join NATO, Moscow sees its growing ties to the alliance as a danger, likely to lead to the deployment of NATO forces and infrastructure in Ukraine, all with the aim of menacing Russia. Moscow does not trust NATO verbal promises that Ukraine will not join and that no infra-structure will be deployed in the country. It sees NATO expansion to date, for which it mostly blames the U.S., as a substantial breach of faith. Historians debate the degree of assurance offered to the Soviet Union that the alliance would not grow, but it is clear that no formal guarantees were granted to Moscow. This historical experience helps explain the Russian demand for “legally binding” agreements this time around.

Still, other factors are likely at play in Presi-dent Putin’s decision to opt for war. One might be that Moscow judges military force as one

As one observer argues, this circle likely has come to exclude those who are more moder-ate and focused on economic development in favour of those who take a harder line and are prone to the zero-sum views described above. Those people, and it seems Putin himself, see a West that is simultaneously losing ground geopolitically and acting aggressively toward Russia, creating both opportunity and impera-tive for Moscow to press its advantage. By this calculus, Ukraine, with such close historical ties to Russia, would be a logical place for the Kremlin to draw a line. This group, moreover, is unlikely to be deterred by sanctions, taking the view that the West is determined to deploy these in an effort to strangle Russia’s economy whatever it does, and that they are irrelevant to themselves personally, as many are already designated.

The war is almost certainly long in the plan-ning. The build-up near Ukraine, beginning

with the smaller version in the spring of 2021, gave Moscow the options it has now acted upon. Moscow's moves of recent weeks show signs of having been carefully orchestrated. The 21 February National Security Council meeting not only looked wooden, despite Putin's assurances that it was not, but appeared to have been taped well in advance, based on the watches visible on participants' wrists. Open-source intelligence journalists questioned whether the evacuation from the breakaway republics was performative after spotting in the video's metadata that both separatist leaders in Luhansk and Donetsk recorded the calls for evacuation on the morning of 16 February, two days before they were aired. Long-planned does not necessarily mean inevitable. But Moscow's unwillingness to budge from its initial maximalist negotiating positions and its continued escalation, all the while meeting Western leaders and in some instances even promising to withdraw troops, suggest that there was not much hope that it would accept a negotiated settlement short of total capitulation.

Critics of Western policy look at fateful decisions with respect to NATO's post-Cold War enlargement and suggest that this crisis is partly of the alliance's own making. But whatever that argument's merits, the complete reversion to the pre-1997 status quo that Russia demanded was never realistic over the past few months, and it is out of the question now. So too was its insistence that NATO formally pledge to cease expansion. First, while the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act prohibits

the permanent stationing of substantial NATO forces on the territories of new members, many of those new members see the presence on their soil of smaller, rotational forces as critical for security, not least because they believe them crucial to dispel any thought Moscow might have of aggressive action – hardly an academic consideration given the course of events in Ukraine. Secondly, although they made clear that they are not looking to admit Ukraine any time soon, NATO members are not as a matter of principle prepared to rescind the open-ended promise that they made in 2008. Thirdly, Western governments were quite reasonably worried about the precedent they might set by appearing to cave in to Russian gunboat diplomacy and the possibility that domestic political opponents might try to tar them as weak.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. and its NATO partners took the best course available to them, making clear that they would support but not militarily defend Ukraine; coming together behind a significant set of costs to impose in the event of further aggression; exposing Russian plans and intentions so as to rob it of legitimising arguments before an international audience; and creating a serious diplomatic option to discuss the issues of greatest concern to Moscow. This approach was never guaranteed to succeed. But the alternatives – either putting military confrontation among nuclear powers on the table or doing nothing, thus encouraging the impression of cost-free aggression – would have been worse.

## Responding to Russia's Aggression

After months of crisis diplomacy have failed to avert what could well be Europe's biggest war in a generation, attention now needs to turn to doing whatever possible to limit the damage. All meaningful responsibility lies with Moscow, which ideally would return to talks with both Kyiv and Western powers and indeed could still benefit from negotiations over the European

security architecture. But with the Kremlin seemingly bent on a more destructive path, others must do what they can to maximise the costs for Russia, to both deter future aggression and, though this appears to be a tall order for now, motivate some rectification of the situation in Ukraine.

The toughest decisions in the coming period likely rest with President Zelenskyy. Severely outgunned, he will need to decide how to wage the war, and what cost his government and the Ukrainian people more broadly are prepared to sustain in defending their homeland. Polling, at least, showed nearly 60 per cent of Ukrainians willing to resist as of mid-February; but with bombs falling and families threatened it is difficult to know whether that sentiment will harden or fade. Kyiv will need to make its calculations without any illusion that NATO member states will come to their aid beyond providing some arms. Even before Putin appeared to threaten to use nuclear weapons in his 24 February speech, Western powers had, understandably, made clear that their military intervention is not on the cards.

For Western powers, the challenges will be of a different nature. Most have already reacted with outrage to what they described as an unjustifiable attack on Europe's stability and the international order. U.S. President Biden warned of a "catastrophic loss of life" and the EU's chief executive Ursula von der Leyen dubbed Russia's advance "barbaric". While reiterating that NATO troops would not enter the fight, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg harshly condemned the Russian action: "Peace on our continent has been shattered," he said. "This is a deliberate, cold-blooded and long-planned invasion. Russia is using force to try to rewrite history". Western states also reportedly prepared a UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia's action, although Moscow is expected to veto when it comes to a vote. The question is what they can do beyond using strong rhetoric that is at once meaningful and mindful of the need to avoid a potentially cataclysmic escalation.

The main focus will be on putting in place and rigorously enforcing sanctions that Western leaders have been threatening for weeks, which will be critical if the bloc's threats are to be seen as a credible deterrent in the future. As of 23 February, the U.S., EU and others including the United Kingdom, Japan and Australia had

already imposed limited sanctions in response to Russia's recognition of Ukraine's two separatist regions. The measures hit Russian banks and individuals and took steps toward cutting Russia out of world financial markets. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's decision to put on ice approval for Russia's Nord Stream pipeline to pump gas to Germany was particularly stark because of Berlin's longtime support for the project and may have helped catalyse the European response. In response to the 24 February attacks, President Biden announced further measures, including sanctions on four of Russia's major state banks and the imposition of export controls to deprive Russia of technological goods that would, in his words, cut off over half of Russia's high-tech imports. The EU is expected to follow suit. South Korea has also now said it would join in the sanctions regime.

As Western powers take these steps, they should be clear about what Moscow can do – namely, reverse its aggression in Ukraine – to get sanctions lifted. This is unlikely to have much impact on a Kremlin leadership that is expecting a heavy economic blow. But it would signal to the Russian people that their political leaders have the power to mitigate the shocks they are about to suffer. Popular sentiment in Moscow suggests a less enthusiastic mood about this military adventure than that which greeted (for example) Putin's 2014 move against Crimea. Though it is a difficult line to walk, the U.S. and other Western powers should do what they can to stay on the right side of the Russian public by avoiding gratuitously punitive measures, such as a blanket visa ban, that would work at cross-purposes with longer-term goals.

NATO members will also have to recalibrate their force posture in Europe, to reassure allies near Russia first and foremost. They will almost certainly raise the tempo of military exercises. The NATO-Russia Founding Act and its commitments will surely join the wealth of other agreements lately sent to the dustbin. Putin's threat of extreme consequences notwithstanding, Western powers should continue to support the Ukrainian state with weapons and supplies



while that remains feasible. At the same time, as tempers run high on both sides of the East-West line, and more NATO forces arrive close to Russia's frontiers, it will be more important than ever that command centres on both sides keep lines open for deconfliction and de-escalation of tensions that could build around higher-than-normal levels of activity.

The West should not be the only bloc that is sending messages to Moscow. The more that non-aligned countries can communicate to Moscow the reputational costs its aggression will incur, the better. They could echo themes in Kenya's intervention at the 21 February UN Security Council meeting: spelling out, in other words, the carnage that would follow if the rest of the world decides to abrogate borders in the ostensible service of uniting like peoples. China, if it chose to, could play a useful role. Though at first muted in backing Russia's moves, Beijing made statements on 24 February that were more supportive of Moscow and avoided calling Russia's attack on Ukraine an invasion. Whatever China's geostrategic calculations to date, it should weigh seriously the risks of throwing its lot in with Putin. Russia's war is a frontal assault on the principle of sovereignty, which China has tended to treat as inviolable. The risks, uncertainty and economic shock waves the crisis will unleash create headaches for everyone, including Beijing.

Preparing to tackle the humanitarian fallout must be another priority. If war continues – particularly if followed by occupation – tens or hundreds of thousands of people, potentially even more, could be displaced, seeking safety and security. Access to necessary medical care for civilians will be at a premium. Ukraine, which thus far appears not to have prepared sufficiently for such eventualities, will need to do what it can, as fast as it can, in cooperation with international organisations and NGOs. Neighbouring countries, which have begun to take steps to get ready, will need to do more. All planning should build on the experience humanitarian organisations have gained in Donbas over the past eight years. Local

organisations, many of which will be uprooted by the invasion, should be given a chance to participate early on in the humanitarian response. Russia itself will have to cope with refugee flows, and be prepared to take on most if not all humanitarian responsibilities in areas it controls. International bodies that monitor the commission of wartime atrocities should also signal that they will be watching the situation as it evolves. For example, the UN General Assembly or Human Rights Council could mandate a fact-finding mission or similar body to collect any evidence of breaches of international law or human rights abuses committed as the hostilities unfold or in any subsequent occupation.

For now, diplomacy and the counter-measures that the West has prepared are unlikely to change the mood in Moscow, and things could well get worse before they get better. War in Ukraine and a military build-up in Eastern Europe all but guarantee new crises, each potentially that much more volatile. While Ukraine clearly holds special significance in Moscow, and to Putin himself, it cannot entirely be assumed that Russia will stop there. As Western states run out of economic punishments to dole out, the pressure to respond militarily will increase. The growing risk means that continued talks about European security and arms control, nuclear and conventional, are necessary, even if, for now, they sadly appear far from reach. Unless and until things indeed escalate to unprecedented levels, the U.S. and the EU will have to resume dialogue with Russia sooner or later, both to ensure that everyone understands fully the consequences of the path they are on and to identify ways to avoid further disaster.

As tanks roll over European borders, it is tempting to look somewhere for hope. Today, sadly, that is in short supply. Right now, it is up to those countries that want to avoid a future made safe for aggressors to demonstrate unity and gird themselves to meet the challenges that lie ahead with prudence and resolve.