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UKRAINE: AFTER INVASION, WHAT?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered a pressure campaign unprecedented in both speed and severity. Many governments are trying to further pressure Moscow. A few others are discussing off-ramps to deescalate the conflict.

It isn't clear, however, what this pressure or those off-ramps are meant to achieve because there has been little discussion of goals. This is a problem because without clear and realistic goals, any endeavor risks crumbling under its own weight or having unwanted consequences.

There can be five different goals after an invasion has begun. The first is to limit damage. In its most sweeping form, it means not getting involved, accepting that the invasion will proceed largely unimpeded and that the targeted country's sovereignty will be sacrificed. The second goal is to stop the aggressor's advance and reach an agreement that hands over some, but not all, of its anticipated gains. The third goal is to restore the status quo ante. The fourth is to go beyond the status quo and punish the aggressor. Finally, the fifth goal is to destroy—literally or de facto—the aggressor because its very existence has become unacceptable.

Thus far, many governments have suggested that the goal of the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is restoration of the status quo. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, for instance, declared that the United States will "support Ukraine in its talks with Russia to reach a ceasefire and the unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces."

For several governments, however, restoring the status quo will likely not suffice. Frontline nations believe that Russia must pay a price to make clear to Putin and all would-be aggressors that such actions will not be tolerated. Some go further. No one serious has recommended Russia's physical destruction, but French Minister of the Economy and Finance Bruno Le Maire stated (then walked back) that the goal of the pressure campaign is to "wage all-out economic and financial war on Russia" to "cause the collapse of the Russian economy."

Others have echoed these themes, suggesting that relations with Moscow cannot return to normal until Russian President Vladimir Putin leaves office and a new regime is in place in the Kremlin. For instance, Ivo Daalder, a former US permanent representative on the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) now president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, has argued for a "robust policy of containment" to "counter Russian expansionism, inflict real costs on the Russian regime, and encourage internal change that leads to the ultimate collapse of Putin and Putinism."

There is a yawning gap, however, between these desired goals and what can be achieved given the limits that the responding powers have set for themselves. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion, US President Joe Biden has insisted that the United States will help Ukraine in every way possible, including by providing military assistance, but that "[US] forces are not and will not be engaged in a conflict with Russia in Ukraine." The United States has resisted establishing a no-fly zone over Ukraine because such an arrangement would put NATO into a direct fight with Russia. Support for Ukraine, then, is unconditional only until there is a risk of escalation and military confrontation with Russia.

In these circumstances, it isn't clear that restoration of the status quo—seemingly the bare minimum acceptable for most governments—is within reach.

Michael McFaul, a former US ambassador to Russia now professor at Stanford University, confessed as much, calling such an outcome "the most desirable but also the least likely."

The Russian military operation isn't proceeding smoothly, and Ukrainian forces are resisting, partly thanks to international assistance, but the power balance is unquestionably in Moscow's favor and Putin appears determined to continue the invasion, indifferent to the consequences, both human and material. Putin seems willing to destroy Ukraine to possess it, using methods not dissimilar to the ones used by Moscow in Chechnya in the 1990s or, under his leadership, Syria this past decade.

For Putin, withdrawal from Ukraine and recognition of its status as an independent state would mean failure, the denial of his conception of Russian identity and the accompanying dream of rebuilding a modern Russian empire. The humiliation would be greater if the outcome entailed acceptance of Ukraine's *complete* territorial integrity, i.e., the return of the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbass, which Moscow recognized as independent before the invasion, and of Crimea, which it annexed in 2014. Make no mistake: many governments demand no less.

More ambitious goals, such as regime change in Russia, are even more elusive, and a new government in Moscow would also not necessarily be an improvement. Besides, pursuing such a goal would likely lead to military escalation—a development the United States, European powers, and others are trying to avoid. Putin, who has long believed that many are out to get him, could feel vindicated and lash out, either by widening the conflict beyond Ukraine or resorting to the use of nuclear weapons.

Avril Haines, the US director of national intelligence, recently said that while Putin likely did not anticipate the pushback he is getting in Ukraine and internationally, he "is unlikely to be deterred by such setbacks and instead may escalate—essentially doubling down." Assume she's right: now imagine what Putin could do if eliminating him became the policy of many governments (and if that policy galvanized Russians to support him).

Given the power asymmetry between Russia and Ukraine and the redlines that the governments responding to the invasion have drawn for themselves, the outcome of the conflict is likely to disappoint many. At best, Ukraine's resistance and the pressure campaign will force Russia into a settlement, with to-be-determined terms, possibly short of restoring the status quo. At worst, Russia might succeed in destroying and/or vassalizing Ukraine.

Analysts will soon begin identifying lessons about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. One is already emerging: there are hard limits to how much developments and outcomes can be shaped after a determined major nuclear-armed power has begun invading a weaker nation, especially when the responding powers rule out military engagement.

Admittedly, different situations will present different challenges and opportunities. In response to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, building a coalition to pressure Beijing would likely be more difficult because many countries are much more dependent on the Chinese economy than on the Russian economy. Stopping or rolling back such an invasion, however, might be less challenging because the maritime environment in Asia presents Beijing with a natural barrier that would complicate its operations.

More importantly, whereas the United States refuses to go to war with Russia over Ukraine because it never committed to its defense, it has remained "strategically ambiguous" as to whether it would do so over Taiwan. In that case, then, Washington would not rule out military action, regardless of the escalation risks. Meanwhile, a military response would definitely be on the table in the event of an invasion of a NATO or another US treaty ally; Biden has stressed that "We will defend every single inch of NATO territory with the full might of a united and galvanized NATO."

The key takeaway from the current conflict in Ukraine is that it is best to prevent an invasion from ever taking place. Practically, and especially for the United States, that means adapting its military posture and that of nations most exposed to, or worried about, potential invasion in ways that deny would-be aggressors the ability to proceed. It also means reducing and, if possible, eliminating dependencies and vulnerabilities they have with potential aggressors. Doing so will enhance deterrence and, should invasion happen regardless, allow for more effective resistance and, therefore, more flexibility in shaping developments and outcomes.

Had Ukraine worked harder (and been helped more) to adopt such a "denial strategy" after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin might have refrained from invading. If he had chosen to do so anyway, his forces would have encountered more resistance, increasing the prospects of a settlement favorable to Ukraine.

Looking to Asia where the power balance is shifting fast in China's favor, this line of thinking should drive actions about Taiwan. No one wants to look back in a few years thinking that more should have been done to prevent or complicate a Chinese invasion. The time to act—and act fast—is now.