

Opinion: The West can't stand by as Putin tries to resurrect the 'evil empire'



Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Dec. 23.
(Andrey Rudakov/Bloomberg News)



By [Max Boot](#) -Columnist – The Washington Post
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Predictably, negotiations last week between the United States and Russia [went nowhere](#). The two sides were simply too far apart.

All the United States wants is to avoid an expanded Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such a move would thrust Europe into its largest conflict since 1945 and violate one of the underpinnings of the post-1945 world order — a prohibition on wars of aggression that Russia has already ignored in both [Georgia](#) and [Ukraine](#).

That's a pretty minimal demand, but it might be more than Vladimir Putin is willing to grant. The Russian dictator has not been subtle or secretive about what he wants. He might as well make the national anthem the Beatles' "[Back in the U.S.S.R.](#)" Indeed, last month, the Russian national hockey team actually wore [throwback jerseys](#) embroidered with "СССР," which is the Russian abbreviation for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This month, Putin sent [troops into Kazakhstan](#) to quell a popular uprising in a faint echo of Czechoslovakia 1968 and Hungary 1956.

Putin has shown no interest in bringing back [Five-Year Plans](#) or the rationing of meat. But he definitely wants to resurrect the Soviet empire, thereby undoing what he has called "[the greatest geopolitical catastrophe](#)" of the 20th century. And that requires bringing back into the fold the second-largest former Soviet republic (by population) — the independent state of Ukraine.

In 2014, when Ukrainians [rose up](#) to oust a pro-Russian ruler, Putin reacted by invading and annexing Crimea and launching a Russian-backed insurgency in eastern Ukraine. But that did not dissuade Ukraine from its pro-Western, democratic path, which constitutes an implicit rebuke to Putin's authoritarian rule. The chances of Ukraine voluntarily becoming a Russian vassal state seem slimmer than ever, so Putin has concocted a crisis to justify an expanded invasion.

His bogus rationale is that NATO's expansion eastward is a mortal threat to Russia. His long [list of demands](#) includes a NATO commitment to exclude Ukraine from membership and not to deploy forces or weapons in the Eastern European countries that joined the [transatlantic alliance](#) after the end of the Cold War. This amounts to an ultimatum to restore Moscow's domination of Eastern Europe — or else. This is clearly a nonstarter, and Putin knows it. Indeed, these demands sound like a ruse to justify an attack on Ukraine.

Yet some naive Westerners take Putin seriously and suggest that it really is NATO's fault that Russia is acting so belligerently. This is a complete rewrite of history, given that in the 1990s, the United States supported Boris Yeltsin because it wanted Russia to be a prosperous and democratic partner for the West. Even after Putin's rise to [power](#), Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump all tried some version of a reset with Russia — to no avail. NATO is a defensive alliance, and it did not [station troops](#) in Poland or the Baltic republics until *after* the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

NATO is working as intended by deterring a Russian attack against its member countries. Putin has set his sights on Ukraine precisely because it is not a member, and there is little indication that he has been dissuaded

by U.S. threats of economic sanctions. President Biden would be well-advised to urgently airlift to Ukraine more of the [weapons systems](#) it needs to defend itself, including “portable air defense systems, anti-tank missiles, anti-ship missiles and counter-battery radars.”

Russia’s deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, bluntly [warns](#) that “a lack of progress toward a political-diplomatic solution” — meaning a Western failure to capitulate to Russia’s demands — “would mean that our response will be military and military-technical.” It is no idle threat, given that Russia has already positioned an estimated [100,000 troops](#) near its border with Ukraine, with more still arriving.

Like [Rob Lee](#) of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, I am [skeptical](#) that Putin will try to invade and occupy all of Ukraine. A country of some 43 million [people](#) is simply too big for the bear to swallow. An occupation would risk embroiling Russia in a costly guerrilla war.

Putin is more likely to launch a blitzkrieg-style attack against Ukrainian military forces, which are concentrated in the east fighting Russian-backed separatists. [Russian troops](#), supported by airstrikes and missile strikes, could mount a pincer attack from both the north and south, dealing a devastating blow to the Ukrainian army. The Russians could then pull back and occupy a land bridge between Crimea and the Donbas region — and much of the world would still breathe a sigh of relief that Putin didn’t march on Kyiv.

I am increasingly pessimistic that we can avert a Russian offensive. If it does occur, we must not flinch from imposing the most draconian sanctions possible, including kicking Russia out of the SWIFT system of interbank transfers and going after the oligarchs’ ill-gotten billions stashed in the West. NATO also needs to bolster its military presence in Eastern Europe and renew efforts to bring Sweden and Finland into the alliance to make clear that Putin’s efforts to cripple NATO will backfire.

The Soviet Union died a deserved death. We cannot stand idly by as Putin attempts to resurrect the “evil empire.”