

A Dangerous Downward Spiral: Averting Catastrophic Risks Emanating from the War in Ukraine

A Proposal from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to Founders Pledge

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Overview

2022 will be remembered as the year that the war in Ukraine shattered irretrievably the post-1989 security environment in Europe and refocused Western policymakers' attention on relations with Russia. Yet a serious reckoning with the potential catastrophic global risks emanating from the war is not taking place. The transatlantic community has, for entirely understandable reasons, focused on mobilizing support for Ukraine and helping it resist the Russian onslaught. In the meantime, very little serious thinking has tackled the unpleasant but unavoidable task of managing relations with a Russia that has become -- and almost certainly will remain -- a renegade actor on the world stage.

Such analysis is urgently needed. We have already witnessed indications that the crisis is likely to intensify in ways that could be catastrophic for the global security landscape. With the Kremlin engaging in nuclear saber-rattling and the Ukrainian government seeking to draw the U.S. and NATO directly into the war, the unimaginable has become part of daily conversations among governments and experts. President Joe Biden has set the right policy parameters and goals. For example, he has repeatedly stated that he does not want the war in Ukraine to trigger World War III. But the short and long-term risks emanating from Russia's confrontation with the United States and Europe are multiplying, nonetheless. Meanwhile, other important global issues, ranging from climate change and food insecurity to nuclear nonproliferation and instability in the Middle East, have become much more difficult to address.

That is why it is time for an honest conversation in the transatlantic community about the long-term global policy challenges stemming from the war in Ukraine. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace plans to launch such a conversation and to help frame, energize, and inform it. The proposed project will draw on Carnegie's unparalleled expertise on Russia, Ukraine, and a broad array of security issues to assess the array of transatlantic interests at stake in the current showdown with Russia and to identify the most effective and sustainable strategies for advancing and protecting them while averting potentially catastrophic outcomes.

Background

The unprovoked Russian attack on Ukraine triggered a cascade of urgent challenges for the United States and its allies and partners. They responded forcefully and creatively, staving off the collapse of the Zelenskyy government and denying the Kremlin the decisive victory that looked like a foregone conclusion in early 2022. After the Ukrainians proved their determination to stand their ground and fight, the United States and its allies supplied enormous quantities of weapons and intelligence to strengthen Kyiv against the much bigger adversary. Since then, the U.S.-led coalition has mobilized billions of dollars in financial assistance, imposed unprecedented economic sanctions, and opened its doors to millions of refugees.

The trajectory of the war remains uncertain. Momentum has shifted in favor of Ukraine since September, but predictions of an imminent Ukrainian victory are as premature as earlier forecasts of an imminent Russian victory. As the war drags on—almost certainly for months, probably years—the risk of escalation and even a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia will be ever-present. Meanwhile, the second and third order effects of the war are creating painful dilemmas for policymakers while also imposing real costs on average citizens around the world.

The impact of the war on the global economy is a case in point. The war is directly contributing to recessionary pressures in major economies, higher inflation, and the long-term disruption of global energy and food supplies. Europe's challenging economic prospects will put continued pressure on political leaders' ability to deliver on their laudable promises to increase defense expenditures and to stay the course on Ukraine. Global efforts to address the climate emergency and energy transition have been downgraded due to the disruption of flows of Russian oil and gas and attempts to cushion economies and publics from the initial shockwaves of the war. The developing world has been hit hard by higher energy costs, disrupted food and fertilizer deliveries, and moves by wealthier countries to shield themselves.

Then there is the question of Russia's trajectory. For Putin, there is no going back on his criminal blunder. There is zero indication that he is having a change of heart about annexing Ukrainian territory or forcing Kyiv back into alignment with Moscow. In fact, he is doubling down on his bet to conquer or destroy Ukraine. Russian leaders have also frequently threatened to attack Ukraine's Western backers. But how long can Russia withstand an open-ended, heavily militarized test of wills with vastly wealthier and technologically more advanced countries like those in the transatlantic community?

Moreover, Putin's nuclear pronouncements remind us that the threat Russia poses to the U.S. homeland and our allies is not going away. That threat rests first and foremost on Russia's second-to-none nuclear arsenal, its space-based military systems, and its offensive cyber capabilities. Moscow has fielded hypersonic weapons and is pursuing such exotic systems as a nuclear-powered drone torpedo armed with a massive nuclear warhead and a nuclear-propelled, nuclear-armed cruise missile. The Kremlin has also played up its ability to hold at risk

Western critical infrastructure such as energy pipelines and underwater cables. Yet the core U.S. concept for deterring Russia is still largely framed around the realities and assumptions of the world that existed on February 23. This needs rethinking.

Project Concept and Goals

Russia's behavior is creating enormous shockwaves throughout the global system. Still, there has been remarkably little discussion about the choices, strategies, and trade-offs that Western decisionmakers will face beyond the immediate imperative of helping Ukraine to fight and survive. The brutality of the Ukraine war, quite understandably, has prompted Western leaders to do everything possible to help Kyiv beat back the invasion and, in President Biden's words, "to stick with Ukraine as long as it takes."

Unfortunately, far less attention has been paid to catastrophic risks and the second and third-order effects emanating from the crisis. Consequences of the increasingly dangerous breakdown in relations with Russia are already being felt across many areas, including fragile regional security balances. Consider, for example, the effects of burgeoning Russian support for China's military modernization on the increasingly fractious U.S.-China relationship and dynamics over Taiwan. Similar examples can be found in other unstable parts of the world. It would be a policy mistake of the highest order to assume that Russia will simply withdraw into itself if defeated on the battlefield in Ukraine, let alone if it wins this war. "A world without Russia" of the sort that some Western thinkers predicted at the end of the 1990s is simply not in the cards. The problems created or exacerbated by its actions will not disappear when the war ends.

Presently, such critically important policy issues remain largely unexplored. Nor is there a clear vision for the way forward let alone a broad international consensus in place. There is almost no discussion of the policies the transatlantic community will need over the long term. Nor have Western policymakers put in place the guardrails that are necessary to prevent the worst. This is in large part because their hands are tied, thanks to Russia's egregious behavior. But eventually, the window for action will open and there will be an opportunity to steer the transatlantic community's approach to Russia in a more strategic direction. Carnegie seeks to help lead the way by sparking an honest, nonpartisan conversation about the long-term implications of the war, the likely choices and trade-offs that will confront policymakers in the coming months and years, and the most effective strategies for dealing with these challenges.

For example:

- What are the capabilities that the transatlantic security community needs to develop, deploy, and maintain to deal with the threat from Russia's nuclear, cyber, space, and conventional military potential? What are the likely implications for the U.S. defense industrial base on top of the challenge of addressing Ukraine's current and

future defense needs? How serious is the threat from these Russian capabilities in the first place?

- How can European states, whether through NATO or the EU, provide meaningful defense capabilities to deter Russian attacks beyond Ukraine and assume their fair share of the military responsibilities and associated costs? What can the United States do to encourage this?
- Are the United States and Europe now locked into a Cold War-style global rivalry with the Kremlin in Europe, the broader Middle East, the Western Hemisphere, and other parts of the world or is the contest limited to Europe? What are the limits of Russian intentions and capabilities?
- What should the transatlantic community's nuclear posture be amid the breakdown in relations with Russia and rising tensions with China? It is a vital issue for the country, yet public discussion has been only sporadic in the wake of the Biden Administration's submission of its Nuclear Posture Review to Congress last March.
- What are the strategic implications of burgeoning Sino-Russian cooperation, especially in the military, technological, and energy realms?
- How will Russia's isolation from the United States and Europe incentivize it to obstruct a host of important Western interests and objectives ranging from nuclear proliferation to counterterrorism to energy transition and fight against pandemics?
- How significant a threat is posed by Russia's ongoing attempts at election interference, disinformation, influence operations, and social media manipulation? What more can be done to shore up the resilience of Western political institutions and processes and how can Russia's actions best be thwarted? How can Western states ensure that their own response in these areas does not undermine democratic values and law?

Project Deliverables

Over the course of the project, which will run for 24 months and conclude during the early stages of the next U.S. administration in early 2025, Carnegie scholars will undertake a coordinated series of interlocking research and outreach activities aimed at developing the intellectual capital that will shape policy in the U.S. and Europe once the current phase of the war ends and the window for more strategic policymaking re-opens.

Our efforts will stimulate a conversation on both sides of the Atlantic and frame important discussions about the major and catastrophic risks as well as strategic choices that the transatlantic community faces when it comes to Russia. Our efforts will target key policy

audiences, the informed public, and the professional networks that Carnegie scholars have cultivated over the course of decades of working within the U.S. national security establishment.

Carnegie scholars will produce various types of research including op-eds, analytical articles, policy papers, and oral briefings. Our materials will encourage discussion of and a reckoning with the long-term consequences and risks of the war and the conflict with Russia. Our work will identify the transatlantic interests at stake and policy options for advancing and protecting them, including those that are not already front and center in the current policy discourse. Carnegie scholars' publications will prioritize concrete policy ideas and proposals for executing them.

Importantly, this body of work will constitute an actionable agenda for current and future administrations seeking to stabilize and manage the relationship when such an opportunity presents itself down the road. For example, the eventual arrival of the post-Putin era will be a very important moment to reassess the key assumptions behind policy toward Russia in the United States and EU.

In addition to this stream of written content, Carnegie scholars will launch a series of targeted outreach efforts and convenings aimed at key parts of the Western policy community at large on both sides of the Atlantic, including policymakers, intelligence analysts, and representatives from the legislative branch. These events will tap Carnegie networks and engage counterparts in a sustained dialogue about the long-term implications of the crisis. Carnegie convenings will focus on how best to manage the long-term impact of the breakdown in relations with Moscow while identifying the types of choices and trade-offs that need to be considered beyond the urgent demands of the current moment.

Materials connected to the project will be disseminated in a variety of formats geared toward reaching their intended audiences. In addition to the project's written output, Carnegie scholars will generate podcasts, short explainer videos, social media campaigns, and the like to expand the reach of our analytical and policy offerings. All materials produced as part of the project will be promoted by Carnegie's world-class communications team and make good use of traditional media outlets where Carnegie scholars' output frequently appears.

Request

To make possible a timely and effective launch of this critical new effort, the Carnegie Endowment requests \$400,000 over two years. These funds will support the work of Carnegie scholars seeking to create content and actionable ideas in a broad array of formats, to engage in outreach to the key audiences identified above, and to pursue interactions with influential members of the policy and analytical communities.