



Russia’s Compellence Tactics on Ukraine

YAMAZOE Hiroshi, Senior Research Fellow

America, Europe, and Russia Division, Regional Studies Department

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Tensions have escalated in recent times with reports of Russian troops gathering around Ukraine in the spring of 2021¹ and again in the fall of the same year. In 2022, with the evacuation of the families of U.S. embassy personnel from Ukraine by the U.S. State Department on January 23, reports swirled in Japan of a dramatic rise in the possibility of a military invasion. Nevertheless, there is no contradiction between the fact that the Russian military has entered its final preparations for an invasion and Russia’s desire for a negotiated settlement; rather, the two are logically complementary. This paper presumes that Russia is employing a “compellence”² strategy aimed at forcing the U.S. to act and attempts to delve deeper into the current situation by inferring Russia’s possible motives for its actions. Analyzing the present situation under a different set of circumstances while a crisis is unfolding should be an instructive intellectual exercise, in light of the crises that Japan may encounter in the future.

Weighing up Russia’s three possible options

President Vladimir Putin’s current intentions remain unclear to us. Russia has traditionally practiced a form of military deception known as *maskirovka*, which President Putin has been trained in and employs to deliberately manipulate the impressions of adversaries.³ With this in mind, the most obvious and noteworthy point is that Russia’s true motives are hidden and not entirely knowable to us. However, to invoke the words of Winston Churchill, “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.” This is a useful clue as we take a closer look at the issue.

If we consider the options available to Russia based on its national interest, there seems to be three different options, broadly speaking: (i) negotiate with the U.S. to gain concessions to Russia’s demands; (ii) attack Ukraine; and (iii) take no action. If Russia’s ultimate goal were to invade Ukraine, its best course of action would

	Option	Possible scenarios
(i)	Negotiated settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-expansion of NATO • Revision of force deployment
(ii)	Attack Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-scale invasion • Targeted attack
(iii)	Take no action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deterioration of strategic environment • Loss of authority

be to launch a surprise invasion without any prior warning, so the most likely priority should be to gain some concessions out of the negotiations. Reverting to the third option at this point would be tantamount to a surrender or an admission of

¹ See my previous commentary in this column, “[Escalation of the Crisis in Ukraine in the Spring of 2021](#)” (NIDS Commentary), National Institute for Defense Studies, May 13, 2021.

² “Compellence” is contrasted with “deterrence,” in which the other party is discouraged from carrying out certain actions. For the argument that Russia has shifted from a deterrence strategy centered on discouraging the expansion of NATO to a compellence strategy aimed at terminating cooperation between NATO and Ukraine, see [Rob Lee, “Moscow’s Compellence Strategy,”](#) Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 18, 2022.

³ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press, 2015.

defeat, or worse still, a loss of authority and the collapse of the Putin administration in Russia. For this reason, Russia might have escalated its threat of attacking Ukraine under the second option as a means of exerting pressure on the U.S. such that the U.S. has no choice but to reach a negotiated settlement with Russia under the first option, since it is unlikely for Russia to pursue the third option. In response to this, the U.S. has refused to agree to a settlement under the first option in line with the conditions proposed by Russia and has called for a withdrawal of Russian troops under the third option, while simultaneously ensuring that it is well-equipped to handle the scenario of an attack under the second option should it occur (an approach that may be inferred from the U.S. evacuation efforts).

However, the above are merely broad options, and there are several other possibilities for a negotiated settlement that do not currently appear to be on the table, including committing to the non-expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the redeployment of forces. In the event of a Russian attack on Ukraine, various possibilities exist as well. With this in mind, we will take a closer look at the scenario of an attack on Ukraine under the second option, which is the direction in which we appear to be heading.

Is it likely for Russia to launch a conventional military invasion of Ukraine?

The scenario that is most widely discussed in the press and in official accounts right now is a specific scenario under the second option: the invasion of Ukrainian territory by the Russian troops mobilized. As of January 2022, medical units and other preparations required to launch an actual military operation have progressed as compared to October 2021, while troops from the Eastern Military District have also advanced into Belarusian territory. These developments support the argument that Russia would not go this far to mobilize troops if it had no intention of utilizing, which has led to discussions on the possible crisis of a full-scale invasion.

While the Kremlin's present public stance is that it is not preparing for an attack, it would be easy for Russia to recant this position and launch a conventional war. As we have witnessed in the past, Russia could simply invoke the "fact" that Ukrainian soldiers had attacked the Crimean Peninsula as the internal justification to launch a military operation by framing it as a "counterattack aimed at neutralizing Ukrainian aggression," which would then allow Russian troops to be deployed throughout Ukraine.

Under such circumstances, Russia would be expected to occupy key strongholds in Ukraine and paralyze the country's national governance. Even if it is not possible for Russia to govern Ukraine on a permanent basis, Ukraine might be forced to agree to terms that are favorable to the Russians in exchange for the latter's withdrawal. This could serve to punish Ukraine for having disrespected Russia by drifting closer to seemingly unreliable NATO members, which may convince more Ukrainians that Ukraine has no choice but to align itself with Russia. Although this strategy would result in Russian casualties from the resistance put up by the Ukrainian forces, arouse deep resentment in both countries, and lead to losses stemming from economic sanctions and the deterioration of diplomatic relations, Russia would not suffer from a large-scale invasion into its territory.

While this is perhaps not Russia's most desired outcome, it may be in its national interest to pursue this relatively more attractive second option by inflicting heavy damage on Ukraine if the first option of a negotiated settlement proves to be out of reach and the third option of withdrawal would likely result in an even more disastrous outcome. Regardless of the extent of losses incurred by the Russians, President Putin could emerge from this conflict with greater legitimacy as an awe-inspiring leader as long as it inflicts heavy losses on the defiant Ukraine than if it had simply yielded to the West and ceased to be feared.

The current administration in Russia has historically gained more from exercising military force than from engaging in diplomatic negotiations. An example is NATO's eastward expansion, which had carried on despite Russian diplomatic opposition but was only halted in August 2008 when Russia decided to resort to military force in Georgia. Russia's diplomatic presence in the Middle East also grew after launching a military operation in Syria in September 2015.

However, Russia has yet to issue a stern and unambiguous message that the failure to reach a negotiated settlement would culminate in a dangerous military situation. We should expect Russian media and think tanks to emphasize the danger of military conflict or warn of a severe crisis in such a situation, but no clear message to this effect has been forthcoming. Instead, they have blamed Ukraine and the U.S. for sparking turmoil and warned of threats in the disputed region in eastern Ukraine. Large-scale military exercises involving the use of strategic nuclear weapons that are typically conducted in the fall and winter of each year have also yet to take place.

The possibility of carrying out targeted attacks with an element of surprise

It is possible for Russia to pursue the second option of attacking Ukraine. However, will Russia launch a conventional military invasion, as "anticipated," with the troops that it has overtly mobilized? Russian forces were also mobilized from February to March 2014 following a public announcement that military exercises would be conducted around Ukraine, which forced the Ukrainian military to prepare for a conventional invasion. What transpired after that was a politically backed coup on the Crimean Peninsula supported by well-trained unmarked troops. These surprising and rapid developments led to a fait accompli that was difficult to reverse. If the Ukrainian military had moved to neutralize this, Russia would have been able to launch a conventional military invasion with its troops under the pretext that its soldiers legally stationed at the Russian Black Sea Fleet were under attack (a tactic that Russia had employed in the past by marching its troops into Georgia in 2008). Therefore, Ukraine failed to reverse these developments even after a month, leading to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia.

If Russia wishes to pursue the second option in 2022 by attacking Ukraine and punishing it, it is not necessary for the Russian troops currently deployed to cross the border. The Donbas region in eastern Ukraine has been mired in civil war for nearly eight years, and the "local armed forces" there could advance into Ukrainian territory to deliver a blow to Ukraine. If Ukraine pushes back too hard on these adversarial forces, it would need to be prepared for Russia's regular forces to cross the border, forcing a negotiated truce in any case. Moreover, Russia can attack Ukraine through the use of missile strikes or cyber-attacks, or even opt to set off other events that Ukraine cannot anticipate and prepare for in advance, including instigating political coups in Kyiv or Odesa.⁴

While the tactics described above may attract economic sanctions and international hostility, they would lead to fewer casualties than a conventional military invasion while still punishing Ukraine and avoiding the need to reach a settlement in the aftermath of an invasion. From Russia's perspective, this is a better option than suffering deep humiliation.

Future developments for successful compellence

But will Russia be able to achieve its objectives by taking the second option of attacking Ukraine in the first place? Regardless of the extent to which this has been presented as a possible option, Russia is unlikely to go down this path if it

⁴ Several research papers have suggested a greater probability of Russia carrying out such targeted attacks. See, for instance, Keir Giles, "[Putin Does Not Need to Invade Ukraine to Get His Way](#)," Chatham House, December 21, 2021; [Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss, "Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business,"](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 12, 2021.

is not confident that doing so will yield satisfactory results. To begin with, if Russia's aim is to establish a more favorable and stable strategic environment, the first option of reaching a negotiated settlement should be the optimal approach. In this context, the second option of attacking Ukraine, which would ignite hostility and instability, is a means of ramping up the pressure to gain concessions by demonstrating that an attack on Ukraine is more imminent than it actually is in reality. Launching small-scale cyber-attacks on Ukraine would be another way to create a greater sense of urgency by portending that a Russian attack may be on the horizon.

However, given the current information that is publicly available, it is unclear if Russia genuinely wishes to reach a negotiated settlement, which is another reason why the second option of attacking Ukraine has become an increasingly likely scenario. Russia's treaty proposals in December contained highly unrealistic demands for NATO to legally commit to non-expansion—which NATO has continued to reject, as widely expected—with the U.S. then responding to Russia in writing on January 26. NATO has not pursued any formal expansion in 2021, nor has Russia clarified the nature of what it deems to be the imminent threat.

If Russia wishes to gain concessions through compellence, it must first propose realistic demands that are acceptable to the U.S. In the absence of clear demands—and specifically, the assurance that Russia will not exercise military force if certain demands are met—the U.S. could not possibly decide to accept Russia's demands and take the necessary actions, much less agree to demands that are unrealistic. This is a point that has been highlighted by several studies on compellence, including Thomas Schelling's work in the 1960s.⁵

Has Russia embarked on a strategy of compellence that is unlikely to yield success? If President Putin had acted on the basis of his emotions and miscalculations without grasping the fundamental principles of compellence, the failure of his attempt at compellence may very well force him to take the second option of attacking Ukraine to avoid the humiliation of withdrawal.

However, if President Putin is indeed employing the logic of compellence to gain concessions from the U.S., he will likely issue clear and acceptable demands to the U.S. moving forward, even if these demands are not apparent to us at the moment. In fact, Russia did not present any demands when the crisis triggered by the buildup of Russian forces began to be discussed in October 2021, which made a Russian attack appear conceivable. It is possible that the Russian authorities decided to set out specific demands through its security arrangement proposals in December only after witnessing the reactions of other countries. With the first round of negotiations having come to an end, Russia has remarked that the U.S. fails to understand its key demands and will likely indicate to the U.S. how far it is willing to go to push for its demands in subsequent negotiations.

President Putin has continued to assert that the strengthening and expansion of NATO is a threat, and in an essay published in July 2021, he maintained that it is inconceivable for Ukraine to exist as an entity separate from Russia.⁶ However, it remains unclear what on Ukraine in 2021 was the unacceptable issue which had prompted Russia to take action, a point that has been widely debated. Clarifying the nature of this issue would allow the U.S. to better determine the extent to which the third option of withdrawal is a plausible outcome, a judgment that is inextricable from the objectives of negotiations carried out under the first option. At this stage, President Putin is perhaps trying to make it impossible to

⁵ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, Yale University Press, 1966. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ken Ohnishi, Senior Fellow, in relation to the theory of compellence. For more information, see [Ken Ohnishi, "Compellence and Coercive Diplomacy: Concepts and Characteristics"](#) (Briefing Memo), National Institute for Defense Studies, March 2019.

⁶ [Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."](#) President of Russia, July 12, 2021.

read too much into the extent of concessions the U.S. is required to make in order to stabilize relations with Russia. We have thus been lured by the Putin administration into a game of speculation on the very question of how far Russia actually intends to go.

Should the plausibility of the third option of withdrawal remain uncertain and the second option of attacking Ukraine veer ever closer to the tipping point of becoming reality, a negotiated settlement may be reached under the first option as long as both the U.S. and Russia can agree on a solution that is preferable to an attack on Ukraine. If so, President Putin would have achieved the outcome of halting the deterioration of Russia's security environment to some extent by successfully reaching a negotiated settlement under the first option made possible by playing up the possibility of attacking Ukraine under the second option. Both Ukraine and the U.S. could avoid conflict in this case, and Russia would feel more at ease for the moment.

If the current crisis were to end with a negotiated settlement after Russia presents clear demands backed by the threat of war, that would be a more favorable outcome for the rest of the world than the outbreak of war. However, such a state of affairs would only be a temporary reprieve. Russia will not have all of its demands agreed to, and it would likely seek opportunities to make further demands. Even though Russia had managed to engage U.S. President Joe Biden in direct dialogue following its military mobilization in the spring of 2021, thereby diminishing the threat of an imminent crisis, a similar crisis that took an even more serious turn unfolded in the fall. As long as Russia succeeds in gaining some concessions through compellence, it would be worth its effort to do so again through other means. Moreover, it has devised and carried out various attacks and disruptive actions that could be used to achieve this objective.⁷ In any case, the prospect of a fundamental stabilization of this situation appears to be a distant possibility.

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プロフィール
profile

YAMAZOE Hiroshi
Senior Research Fellow
America, Europe, and Russia Division
Regional Studies Department

Areas of Expertise:
 Russian security and international history

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Planning and Coordination Office, National Institute for Defense Studies
 Telephone (direct): 03-3260-3011
 Telephone (general): 03-3268-3111 (ext. 29177)
 FAX: 03-3260-3034
 *National Institute for Defense Studies website:
<http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/>

⁷ [Hiroshi Yamazoe, "Russia's Multi-layered Means of Conflict"](#) (Briefing Memo), National Institute for Defense Studies, October 2020.