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Introduction

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is often asserted that such aggression must not be rewarded. To prevent future aggression, therefore, requires denying Russia victory and raising the costs of its actions (Bayer, 2022; Inozemtsev, 2025; Sikharulidze, 2023). This echoes the core tenets of deterrence literature: capabilities and manipulating the cost-benefit analysis of an adversary. This paper, however, examines the role of having a reputation for resolve in deterring future Russian aggression, an aspect that has been under-highlighted in deterrence literature. It presumes that repeated responses and the 'firmness' of them create expectations about future behaviour, which will either encourage or discourage future behaviour of an adversary. To date, various papers have used the term to explain Russia's repeated aggression following the five-day war in Georgia (2008), the conflict in Ukraine (2014-2022) and Ukraine War (starting in 2022), often treating it as a singular aspect, but not as the overall focus of the paper and few of them examine the challenges to this in response to the 2022 War (Collins & Sobchak, 2023b, 2023a; Karatnycky, 2023; Majcin, 2025).

As the Russia-Ukraine War (2022) enters its third year, this paper sets out to examine the challenges faced by the United States and European member states in demonstrating resolve to prevent future Russian aggression. It begins by introducing the theoretical basis of resolve. Then, it turns to the reputation of resolve that the Europeans and the US have cultivated by examining their responses to Russia's acts of aggression in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-2022). In the next two sections, concerns over escalation and maintaining an unified response are analysed as two salient challenges for demonstrating resolve. It will be argued that the Ukraine War (2022) marks a significant departure from the relatively weak resolve during the preceding crises. Unlike before, Kyiv is now supported through unprecedented unity by the lethal military assistance it receives and the scale of the punitive economic measures imposed against Russia. However, the conditions that sustain this unity are increasingly subject to mounting political and economic pressures, including a widening rift between Europe and the US' Ukraine policy. These factors may erode future unity between Europeans amongst each other, as well as with the US, which in turn may affect the perceived willingness to bear the costs associated with responding firmly to Russia's aggression over the long run.

1. Deterrence and resolve

Successful deterrence is considered to take place when an adversary believes the deterrer possesses the capabilities to execute a deterrent threat, possesses resolve and that the costs of not pursuing a course of action are lower than maintaining the status quo (Greenhill

& Krause, 2018, pp. 11-12). Resolve can be understood as 'firmness', 'toughness' or 'willpower' to stand firm and bear the cost and risks associated to achieve a desirable outcome, without stepping down (Greenhill & Krause, 2018, pp. 11-12; Lupton, 2018, p. 61; Mercer, 1996, p. 1; Schelling, 1966, p. 180; Yarhi-Milo & Casler, 2023, p. 428).

Cultivating a reputation of resolve, or conversely, irresoluteness, through repeated behaviours, is considered essential for informing expectations about a state's future behaviour (Schelling, 1966, p. 124). Having a track-record of irresoluteness is considered to invite greater resistance and aggression in the future (Lupton, 2018, p. 61; Schelling, 1966, pp. 124-125; Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo, 2015, p. 492), and backing down from their threats undermines the believability of future resolve (Clare & Danilovic, 2012, p. 6). What means are used to demonstrate resolve, or whether it takes place in the first place, is often contingent on the interest at stake and conditioned by both domestic and international (geo)political and economic factors (Weisiger & Yarhi-Milo, 2015, p. 474; Zhang, 2019, pp. 125-127). Hence, it can be expected that states will demonstrate a high resolve regarding issues where the stakes are high and, conversely, be irresolute when these are low (Kertzer, 2017, p. 113). Because talk is cheap in international politics, resolve is cultivated when rhetoric matches actions (Yarhi-Milo & Casler, 2023, p. 426). Generally, economic means are considered to carry fewer costs and risks compared to military ones (McMaster et al., 2025, p. 3; Mulder, 2022, p. 98) and therefore represent a weaker means of demonstrating resolve.

2. The Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-2022) crises as a failure of resolve

It has been argued that the lack of resolve in responding to Russia's aggression in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-2022) contributed to the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022 (Collins & Sobchak, 2023a; Karatnycky, 2023; Majcin, 2025). While both cases triggered firm rhetorical condemnation, they differed in the level of resolve. During the five-day war in Georgia (2008), Russia played an active role in escalating the conflict, that later resulted in launching a counteroffensive against Georgian troops, under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russians. This allowed Russian forces to considerably expand the insurgents' territory, solidified Russian control over the breakaway territories and turned it into a de facto frozen conflict (Crow, 2008; Dickinson, 2021; Kofman, 2018). The response from Europeans and Americans was largely muted. Support was mostly confined to humanitarian aid and rhetorical condemnation, while military assistance and economic sanctions against Russia remained out of the question (Dickinson, 2021; France 24, 2008; Sikharulidze, 2023; Sparrow, 2008). Instead, the dominant response was calling for the need to normalise relations with Russia, refraining from imposing economic sanctions, as exemplified by the Obama administration's 'reset' policy on Russia that essentially absolved any serious economic repercussions (BBC, 2008; Blank, 2009, pp. 104-121; White House, 2010).

Comparatively, the annexation of Crimea (2014) and the following proxy conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions triggered a stronger response. The EU and the United States began to impose a continuously expanding package of sanctions on Russian entities, which not only caused economic harm to Russia, but also to the sanctioners (European Council, n.d.; Gros & Mustilli, 2016; Speck, 2016, p. 9). Moreover, aAlthough states began to provide military aid, the response was also marked by caution and restraint. Many European countries were hesitant to provide military aid due to escalatory risks and concerns over preserving relations with Russia (Speck, 2016, p. 7), a view reflected in Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement that "I am convinced that this conflict cannot be solved militarily" (Smale, 2015). It also took three years until the end of the Obama administration for the US to start providing limited lethal military assistance, with several restrictions in place, because it was otherwise considered too provocative. As such, the US has provided Ukraine with Javelin missiles, but those were banned from being used in the proxy conflict in Eastern Ukraine, thereby only serving as a strategic deterrent (Collins & Sobchak, 2023a; Gordon & Schmitt, 2015; Karatnycky, 2023; Yousif, 2022).

Simultaneously, EU policy towards Russia emphasised selective engagement (European Parliament, 2016). It reflected a desire of states to preserve their relations with Russia, but also led to contradictory signals in demonstrating stronger resolve. This is especially evident with Germany's approval of the Nord Stream 2 project. It deepened economic relations and increased Europe's gas dependency on Russia, in parallel with economic sanctions, which could be read as an unwillingness to sacrifice economic wellbeing over geopolitical considerations. Moreover, the sanctions imposed were considered limited, even modest by some, and focused on individuals rather than on targeting Russia's economy as a whole in order to weaken it (Bildt et al., 2021, p. 2; Bolton, 2022; Lebovic, 2023, p. 149; Rojansky, 2016).

3. A paradigm shift in resolve: the 2022 Ukraine War and the risk of escalation

As Russian troops amassed at the border in the months leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, the US disclosed intelligence warning that an invasion was an imminent threat. Europeans and the US attempted to deter the Kremlin, as Anthony Blinken, Ursula Von der Leyen and Olaf Scholz warned that 'massive consequences' and concrete economic repercussions will follow if Russia was to escalate the Ukraine crisis militarily, while underlining a hope towards a diplomatic recourse instead (DW, 2022; Euronews, 2022b; European Parliament, 2021). However, only some countries provided limited military support while others, such as Germany, ruled it out completely (Euronews, 2022a; European Parliament, 2021; Reuters, 2022). It was only after Russian troops crossed the border, shattering long-held ideas and hopes that engagement with Russia would steer towards a

cooperative course of action, that European capitals and Washington began to display unity in their responses to Russia's conduct, in a way that was unthinkable throughout the Georgia and Ukraine (2014-2022) crises. States no longer hesitated to supply Ukraine with lethal military aid, and introduced an unprecedented wave of sanctions on Russia, while extending unwavering moral and financial support to Kyiv (Chachko & Heath, 2022; Hoff, 2022).

Yet, a persistent challenge for demonstrating resolve in Ukraine lies in its increasing consequential military support, as it conflicts with another aim: avoiding a direct confrontation with NATO, not least the potential for nuclear escalation (Freedman, 2023, pp. 22-23). It is a risk that is ruthlessly amplified and leveraged by the Kremlin, by its repeated nuclear sabre-rattling and inflated red lines, to force risk-avoiding policies and compliance (Echevarria II, 2024; Raine, 2025; Sanders et al., 2022, p. 7). This has posed constraints on providing increasingly advanced weaponry to Ukraine, such as the abandoned initial proposal to supply Polish MiGs to Ukraine (Raine, 2025), the delayed deliveries on long range weapons and F-16's (Walla, 2022) and the range these weapons can be used, as it took three years into the war for range restrictions to be lifted, in 2025 (Vakulina, 2025). Given these restrictions and cautiousness, the military assistance Ukraine receives is often characterised by its incrementalism, which does provide Ukraine the means to survive, but not to 'win' (Carson, 2023; Mackinnon, 2024; O'Brien, 2024, p. 33; Schadlow, 2023).

Although the risks of escalation in the present crisis are real and warrant prudent sensitivity, it puts the United States and its European allies on the back foot in demonstrating resolve. Signs of hesitancy and restraint in providing military assistance may be viewed as a weak willingness to take risks, as aptly put by Thomas Schelling (1966, p. 94): "international relations often have a character of a competition in risk taking". Beyond prudent sensible decisions, such as communicating clearly that no NATO member states will deploy ground troops in Ukraine or refraining from imposing a no-fly zone, a hesitancy to provide more military assistance and being too careful in controlling the risks of escalation can be read as an unwillingness to take risks. It may also signal that the costs and risks of supporting Ukraine are not considered important enough in relation to national interests, which reinforces the notion that Ukraine is not as important to the states supporting it as it is to Russia.

4. Preserving unity under political and economic pressures

Preserving the unity that the 2022 Ukraine War galvanised is imperative for demonstrating strong resolve, as it brings together the collective capabilities to impose deterrent measures, create the possibility of distributing costs and provide the basis for an unified response. Underneath the face of unity, however, increasing pressures challenge the unity it enjoyed

when the war started (Stolle, 2024, p. 219). Broad public support, as the foundation for unity among states, was possible because the invasion united the political right and left, early Ukrainian success in reclaiming Russian-occupied territory and a perceived return of a strong West led by the US (Leonard & Krastev, 2023). However, these conditions are becoming increasingly fraught. Societal undercurrents more conciliatory to Russia, along with economic pressures, are challenging the willingness to maintain costly deterrence measures (Gleichgewicht, 2024; Tocci, 2022). And, as the war turned into a war of attrition, in which marginal territorial advances are achieved at a profound cost of life, it no longer triggers optimism that Ukraine might decisively turn the tide. Instead, it has become a protracted contest of endurance, one which Putin believes he can win, as public support will run dry in the 'West' first (Leonard & Krastev, 2023).

For many European states, societal sentiments that seek to reconfigure the measures that are taken in response to Russia's conduct are often the product of a combination of geography, national interests and historical relations with Russia (Stolle, 2024, p. 221). Those with culturally-closer and historically-warmer relations tend to foster more conciliatory sentiments in both left and right-wing circles (Geidel, 2023; Gleichgewicht, 2024; Stolle, 2024, p. 221). Economic interests similarly pose a challenge to preserving resolve. Keeping in place the extensive sanctions regime as inflation is climbing and energy prices soar, as a result of both sanctions and the continuation of the war, particularly hurt countries which had close economic ties with Russia before the war — especially those with a high reliance on Russian gas imports. Some European countries have continued to import Russian LNG throughout the Ukraine War (2022), and some politicians are suggesting reopening gas pipelines to lower energy costs and improve diplomatic ties with Russia once the fighting ceases (Gross & Stelzenmüller, 2024; Nöstlinger, 2025), despite the stated ambition of the European Commission (2025a) to be independent from Russian gas by 2027. Although support for sending arms to Ukraine and keeping sanctions in place on Russia remains high, it is slowly decreasing over time (Demertzis et al., 2023), and can progressively erode further as financial fragility deepens (Chachko & Heath, 2022, p. 138).

One pressing challenge to preserve resolve arises from the Trump administration's foreign policy shift on Ukraine. As Trump's ambitious claim to end the conflict "within 24 hours" has failed to deliver, the administration is increasingly revealing impatience in bringing a conclusion to the conflict and de-prioritising Ukraine, as Mario Rubio (2025) suggested that "we're just going to move on. It's not our war. We have other priorities". This reflects a broader distrust towards Ukraine within the Trump administration, as Trump alleged that "Ukraine should not have started this war" (Richards, 2025), calling Zelensky a "dictator" and suggesting that Kyiv has misappropriated funds from the US "like from a baby" (Gunerigok, 2025).

Simultaneously, in pursuit of a peace agreement, the US strikes a more conciliatory approach towards Russia (Belin et al., 2025). The Trump administration has lifted some individual sanctions and financial restrictions in the nuclear energy sector (Seibt, 2025), and in contrastto British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's call to "'increase economic pressure" to ensure Russia "is serious about peace"" during the G7 summit of 2025. Trump instead revealed a cost sensitivity, by responding that sanctions "cost the US a lot of money — a tremendous amount of money" (Boscia, 2025), which undermines the US' perceived willingness to bear the costs in responding to Russia. Moreover, Trump has expressed enthusiasm for the possibility of doing business with Russia, as he remarked that "Russia wants to do large scale trade with the United States", providing "tremendous opportunity for Russia to create massive amount of jobs and wealth" while vowing that the American taxpayer is "going to get their money back", in reference to the Ukraine mineral deal (Euronews, 2025; Rescheto, 2025).

This approach to Russia leans towards economic engagement and resembles a policy of compellence more than deterrence (Belin et al., 2025; Johnson, 2025a). Such an approach, together with the concessions Trump is willing to make to bring the Ukraine crisis to a conclusion, risks undermining prior US commitments and creating a rift in a unified response with its European allies. Trump's suggestion that Ukraine should recognise Russian sovereignty over Crimea (Erica & Kanno-Youngs, 2025; The Economist, 2025b), de facto legitimising the illegal annexation of the peninsula, represents a significant shift in US policy (Sabanadze, 2025). Moreover, the current administration's approach contrasts sharply with Joe Biden's (2022) aim to provide Ukraine the "strongest possible position at the negotiating table". Instead, it has, on various occasions, withheld and suspended providing military aid and intelligence to get Ukraine to the negotiation table and has pressured Ukraine into making concessions (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025; Lillis et al., 2025; The Economist, 2025a). Although, Trump is gradually redirecting his impatience with Ukraine to Russia, as Trump is now alluding to the possibility of imposing sanctions on Russia if no peace agreement is reached and, in a departure from his earlier stance, is now signalling to provide Ukraine with arms (Bennett & Gardner, 2025; The Economist, 2025c). It remains to be seen whether such a pivot takes place, and how far and for how long the administration is willing to increase pressure on Russia (Chazan, 2025; Ryan, 2024; Walla, 2025).

The uncertainties over future US commitments to Ukraine make it imperative for the European Union to preserve a strong resolve while strengthening its own deterrence. So far, with the US stalling new contributions to Ukraine's aid, some European capitals have significantly stepped up their military support which, for the first time since June 2022, surpasses the US in the total amount of military aid provided to Ukraine (Nishikawa et al., 2025). Whereas the US appears to be using economic carrots inducements to persuade

Russia, the European Union has introduced its 18th sanction package, targeting Russia's energy exports, including a proposal for an oil price cap, and further excluding Russian banks from the financial system (Johnson, 2025b; Starcevic, 2025). Stepping up militarily represents a significant development, as it demonstrates a stronger resolve compared to economic measures. Moreover, reaching the 18th round of sanctions, the disentanglement of Russia's economy from Europe's, while Russia's economy gravitates closer to China's (European Commission, 2025b, pp. 5-6; Kluge, 2024, pp. 5-6), heightens the importance to step up Europe's deterrence beyond its traditional reliance on economic instruments.

Conclusion

Cultivating a reputation for resolve is central for conditioning expectations about the future behaviour of states. This paper contests that inadequate demonstrations of resolve in past instances of Russian aggression may have shaped a perception that Europe and the US' response to the 2022 Ukraine War would remain limited and not endure over time. To ensure resolve in response to the present war, this paper finds that concerns over escalation and the risk of disunity are two persistent elements that have challenged resolve throughout the three crises.

Persistently, the need to demonstrate resolve has to be reconciled with both domestic and international interests. Before 2022, states progressively strengthened their responses after each instance of Russian aggression, yet they could often not find the common ground for an unified response, resulting in limited collective responses often geared towards avoiding escalation and preserving their relationships with Russia, alongside protecting economic interests. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 paved the way for a more unified approach, as a common understanding emerged that engagement with Russia cannot continue in the same way as it has during the previous crises. However, beneath this unity, economic and political pressures are mounting, which risk undermining the perceived willingness to forgo economic opportunities and incur costs in responding to Russian aggression, such as the US' policy shift under the Trump administration. If this unity falters, as voices opposing tougher measures and proponents of economic engagement with Russia prevail, it risks cultivating an image that there is an unwillingness to compromise on economic wellbeing or political interests to stand firm against acts of aggression in the future.

Whatever the outcome of the Ukraine War may be, Russia will remain a country too big to ignore, with Putin most likely in power. There will be a need to navigate relations with the country that will have to reconcile resolve with well-justified concerns over escalation, as well as political and economic realities. Nor will resolve alone be sufficient to deter future

aggression, as the most effective deterrence relies on a mix of coercive instruments and other tools, such as compellence and providing assurances (Cebul et al., 2021, p. 795; Morgan, 2003, pp. 162-163; Pauly, 2024, p. 92). Therefore, there should be a place for diplomacy and some forms of engagement, but these should not undermine cultivating a reputation of resolve, as a result of contradictory policies or insufficient responses, as has happened in the past.

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