

War and Appeasement

[Excerpt from Chapter 10 of Garry Kasparov's 2015 book, *Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped*. Paperback release Nov 8, 2016, by [PublicAffairs](#)]

At the end of February 2014, for the second time in six years, Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops across an internationally recognized border to occupy territory. This fact must be stated plainly before any discussion of motives or consequences. Russian troops took Ukrainian Crimea by force—and also assisted with the evacuation there of Viktor Yanukovich. This act made Putin a member of an exclusive club, along with Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milošević, as one of the very few leaders to invade a neighboring nation in the nuclear age. A few weeks later Putin outdid Milošević by formally annexing Crimea, as Hussein did with Kuwait.

Such raw expansionist aggression had been out of fashion since the time of Adolf Hitler, who eventually failed, and Joseph Stalin, who succeeded. Stalin's Red Army had its share of battlefield glory, but his real triumph came at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, three months before the end of the war in Europe. There Stalin bullied a feeble Franklin Roosevelt and a powerless Winston Churchill, redrawing the Polish borders and promising elections in Poland when he knew that the Communist government the Soviets were installing was there to stay.

Although it is a poignant coincidence, there is more to this look back to World War II than the fact that Yalta is located in Crimea. Putin's tactics are easily, and accurately, compared to those of the Austrian Anschluss and the Nazi occupation and annexation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia in 1938. There was the same rhetoric about protecting a threatened population, the same propaganda filled with lies, justifications, and accusations. Putin also followed the Stalin model on Poland in Yalta: first invade, then negotiate.

Crimea was forced to hold a sham referendum over joining Russia a few weeks later, a vote that took place on the Kremlin's preferred terms, at the point of a gun and with the result never in doubt. That Crimeans had already voted in the past to stay part of Ukraine did not come up.

Putin's move in Crimea came just hours after then-Ukrainian president Yanukovich scrambled up his puppet strings from Kyiv to his master's hand in Russia. He left behind thousands of papers and a few palaces, evidence of the vast scale of his personal and political corruption. His ejection, bought in blood by the courageous people of Ukraine, made Putin look weak. Like any schoolyard bully or crime boss, Putin immediately found a way to look and feel tough again. The historically pivotal Crimean peninsula, with its large Russia-leaning population and geographic vulnerability (and a Russian naval base), was a natural target.

As I have said for years, it is a waste of time to attempt to discern deep strategy in Mr. Putin's actions. There are no complex national interests in his calculations. There are only personal interests, the interests of those close to him who keep him in power, and how best to consolidate that power. Without real elections or a free media, the only way a dictator can communicate with his subjects is through propaganda and the only way he can validate his power is with regular shows of force.

Inside Russia, that force is brought forth against dissidents and civil rights. Abroad, force in the form of military action, trade sanctions, or economic extortion is applied wherever Putin thinks he can get away with it. So far, that has been quite often and so far, Putin has been right.

Despite the predictions of many pundits, politicians, and so-called experts, Putin formally annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea. Perhaps Putin was not impressed by these critics' sound reasoning and elegant discourse on how his invasion and annexation were against Russian national interests! The main problem with what we can call the "Putin would never" arguments in the West is that they assume Putin and his ruling elite care about Russian national interests. They do not, except in the few areas where they overlap with their own goal of looting as much cash and treasure from the country as possible. It is long past time to stop listening to Harvard professors and think-tank experts lecture us about what Putin would never do and high time to respond to what he is actually doing.

The next obstacle to stopping Putin is the self-imposed paralysis of the leaders of Europe and the G7. The hard truth is that the only sanctions, or actions of any kind, that will affect Putin's

conduct are those that directly or indirectly target his hold on power in Russia. It's all Putin cares about because he knows what happens to people like him when they lose that grip. This is why Secretary of State John Kerry's comment to his counterpart Sergei Lavrov after Crimea was so precisely wrong. "We hope President Putin will recognize that none of what we're saying is meant as a threat," Kerry said. "It's not meant in a personal way." With one feeble remark, Kerry took the only things Putin cares about, threats and personal power, off the table.

Obama repeated this mistake two days later when he announced America would not send troops to defend Ukraine. Nobody was asking for troops anyway, and Obama likely thought he was defusing tensions. But where Obama sees a gesture of peaceful intent, Putin simply sees more weakness. Dropping your weapons to calm a hostage situation might work on a scared kid but it doesn't work against someone like Putin. In Putin's eyes, Obama is his only real opponent in the world and his opponent had just voluntarily surrendered one of his greatest advantages: America's overwhelming military strength. On Iran, on Syria, and then again in Ukraine, Obama outsourced his foreign policy to Putin and, by so doing, he crippled the power of the office he holds in ways that will outlast his White House tenure for years.

On March 28, Putin called Obama to discuss Ukraine, although what was said is different from what was heard. Analyzing the discrepancies between the White House and Kremlin press releases of these calls has become a cottage industry and usually you would never guess that the reports are about the same conversation. The White House report mentioned the need for "constitutional reform and democratic elections" in Ukraine and Russia pulling back its troops from Eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin summary referred to the "rampant extremists" in Kyiv and added the separatist Moldovan region of Transnistria to the conversation in a blatant threat to up the ante once again.

I was more interested in a word that wasn't mentioned in either summary: "Crimea." Evidently this chunk of sovereign Ukrainian territory, invaded and annexed by Putin just weeks earlier, had already ceased to be part of the conversation. Just a day earlier, the United Nations General Assembly had done what the Security Council could not do due to Russia's veto there. The General Assembly resolution in defense of the territorial integrity of Ukraine received a hundred

votes and even intense Russian pressure produced only ten allies, a predictable rogue's gallery that included Cuba, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Syria, and North Korea. And yet Obama suddenly appeared ready to let Putin shift the frame of the negotiations to whether or not Russia would conquer *more* of Ukraine.

A month previous, Western pundits had been full of more "Putin would never" predictions, and many warned not to "corner" Putin but to instead offer him a "face-saving retreat" from Crimea. Putin was not interested in any retreat at all and he reversed the tactic against Obama and the West, offering them a face-saving retreat with Eastern Ukraine as the new line in the sand. Over a year later, at the end of April 2015, the fighting there still rages despite several pathetic "cease-fire" agreements that also existed only for Western leaders to save face.

Negotiating with another country's territory as collateral has a long history. The most obvious example is from 1938, when Hitler graciously offered not to take all of Czechoslovakia in exchange for getting the Sudetenland without any complaints from Britain and France. North Korea and Iran also like to have one-on-one talks with the United States, a way of saying nobody else matters. But Ukraine is not USA versus Russia; it's the civilized world versus a dictator, and the United Nations vote supported that assessment ten to one.

The mandate for continued pressure on Putin is clear, if only the West has the courage to maintain it and increase it. Otherwise, just as Czechoslovakia was absent from the "great power" negotiations in 1938, Ukraine's fledgling government will be relegated to the role of a spectator, a patient under local anesthetic watching helplessly as the surgeons slice away. For the United States to participate in talks is well and good, especially as a signatory of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukraine's territory. But Ukrainian representatives should be present at every step and the people of Ukraine must be kept informed throughout before other nations get too far along in deciding what is in Ukraine's best interests.

Putin once again refuted the predictions of his defenders in the West and continued his invasion of Eastern Ukraine. A few months later, as summer approached, thousands of Ukrainians, including many civilians, were dead and hundreds of thousands had been forced to flee. The

Ukrainian military was severely overmatched by the “rebel” forces, not that there had ever been a rebel or separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine worth mentioning before Putin discovered a huge and very well-equipped army of them. Europe and the United States refused to provide weapons to Ukraine, limiting themselves to humanitarian aid and a few vehicles.

Actions directed at Putin were also shockingly weak despite the clear presence of Russian forces and Russian arms flooding into Ukraine. It’s one thing for academics and pundits to calmly sympathize with Putin and his “vital interests” and his “sphere of influence,” as if 50 million Ukrainians should have no say in the matter. It’s quite another thing for Barack Obama, David Cameron, and Angela Merkel to fret about the “instability” and “high costs” caused by sanctions against Russia, as if that could be worse than the instability caused by the partial annexation of a European country by a nuclear dictatorship, carried out with impunity.

This fecklessness was sad and expected, but I thought it might finally come to an end on July 17 when Malaysia Airlines flight 17 (MH17) was blown out of the sky over Eastern Ukraine by a surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people aboard. The local separatist leadership immediately boasted about shooting down what they had thought was another Ukrainian military plane, only recanting their statements and deleting their posts when it was revealed to have been a civilian aircraft.

Of course the shock and horror would turn to rage and shame among the leaders of the free world that the war in Ukraine had been allowed to fester. Of course Putin would realize he’d overplayed his hand and attempt to preempt the backlash by withdrawing his forces and his support for Ukrainian separatist terrorists. Of course the fact that two-thirds of the passengers were European (193 of them Dutch) would lead to massive Western protests and stiff penalties against Russia.

Of course none of that happened.

I said at the time that MH17 wouldn’t change Putin’s calculations in any way, but I hoped it would provoke a Western response that would. Somehow I managed to underestimate the cowardice of the Western world once again. The rhetoric changed a little, and briefly, but little

else. An investigation was announced, although it would take a long time to get started since the separatist forces would not allow the wreckage and bodies to be collected until they had looted them. Where was the rage? Nobody believed the separatists' excuses or Russian propaganda about anything other than a Russian missile. Was it because Ukraine was far away, was poor and unimportant, and had been turned into a war zone? Had Putin's forces shot down that same aircraft over Amsterdam or Kuala Lumpur would it have made a difference? I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

So who was to blame? This is not a simple question even if you know the answer. That is, of course the person who pushed the button that launched the missile is to blame; that is the easy part. Shall we just arrest him and try him for murder? Responsibility is a greater concept than that. You have the commander who gave the order to push the button. Then the person who provided the missiles to the separatists. Then there are the officials who opened the border to allow military weaponry to cross into Ukraine and the ministers and generals in Moscow who gave those orders. Then we come to the desk where all power resides in Russia, the desk of the man those ministers and generals obey very carefully: the desk of Vladimir Putin.

Blaming Putin for these 298 deaths is as correct and as pointless as blaming the man who pressed the button that launched the missile. Everyone had known for months that Russia arms and supports the separatists in Ukraine. Everyone had known for years that a mouse does not squeak in the Russian government without first getting Putin's permission. So, yes, Putin is responsible for those 298 deaths, more than anyone else.

But blaming Putin for invading Ukraine—for annexing Crimea, for giving advanced surface-to-air missiles to separatists—is like blaming that proverbial scorpion for stinging the frog. It is expected. It is his nature. Instead of worrying about how to change the scorpion's nature or, even worse, how best to appease it, we must focus on how the civilized world can contain the dangerous creature before more innocents die.

Therefore let us cast our net of responsibility where it may do some good. We turn to the leaders of the free world who did nothing to bolster the Ukrainian border even after Russia annexed

Crimea and made its ambitions to destabilize Eastern Ukraine very clear. Is the West to blame? Did they push the button? No. They pretended that Ukraine would not affect them. They hoped that they could safely ignore Ukraine instead of defending the territorial integrity of a European nation under attack. They were paralyzed by fear and internal squabbles. They resisted strong sanctions on Russia because they were worried about the impact on their own economies. They protected jobs but lost lives.

Would this tragedy have happened had tough sanctions against Russia been put into effect the moment Putin moved on Crimea? Would it have happened had NATO made it clear from the start that they would defend the sovereignty of Ukraine with weapons and advisors on the ground? We will never know. Taking action requires courage and there can be high costs in achieving the goal. But as we now see in horror there are also high costs for inaction, and the goal still has not been achieved.

The argument that the only alternative to capitulation to Putin is World War III is for the simple-minded. There were, and always are, a range of responses. Financial and travel restrictions against Putin's cronies and their families and harsh sanctions against key Russian economic sectors may also do some damage to European economies. Until MH17, Europe could argue about how much money their principles were worth. After MH17 they had to argue about how much money 298 lives were worth.

As Russian troops and armored columns advance in Eastern Ukraine the Ukrainian government begs for aid from the free world. That's the same free world Ukrainians hoped would receive them and protect them as one of its own after the protesters of Maidan grasped their victory paid in blood. The leaders of the free world, meanwhile, are still struggling to find the right terminology to free themselves from the moral responsibility to provide that protection. Putin's invasion of a sovereign European nation is an "incursion," much like Crimea—remember Crimea?—was an "uncontested arrival" instead of Anschluss. A civilian airliner was blown out of the sky by Russian-backed and Russian-armed (and likely Russian, period) forces in Eastern

Ukraine and, despite the 298 victims, the outrage quickly dissipated into polite discussions about whether it should be investigated as a crime, a war crime, or neither.

This vocabulary of cowardice emanating from Berlin and Washington is as disgraceful as the “black is white” propaganda produced by Putin’s regime, and even more dangerous. Moscow’s smokescreens are hardly necessary in the face of so much willful blindness. Putin’s lies are obvious and expected. European leaders and the White House are even more eager than the Kremlin to pretend this conflict is local and so requires nothing more than vague promises from a very safe distance. As George Orwell wrote in his 1946 essay on language, right before starting work on his novel *1984* (surely not a coincidence), “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” The Western rhetoric of appeasement creates a self-reinforcing loop of mental and moral corruption. Speaking the truth now would mean confessing to many months of lies, just as it took years—and this war—for Western leaders to finally admit Putin didn’t belong in the G7.

New Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko met with President Obama in Washington in September, but Obama’s subsequent statement showed no sign he was willing to acknowledge reality. Generic wishes about “mobilizing the international community” were bad enough when it all started. Hearing them repeated as Ukrainian towns fell to Russian troops is a parody. I suggested at the time that Poroshenko should have worn a T-shirt saying “It’s a War, Stupid” to the meeting. As Russian tanks and artillery push back the overmatched Ukrainian forces, Obama’s repeated insistence that there is no military solution in Ukraine sounds increasingly delusional. There is no time to teach a drowning man to swim.

The United States, Canada, and even Europe have responded to Putin’s aggression, it is true, but always a few moves behind, always after the deterrent potential of each action had passed. Strong sanctions and a clear demonstration of support for Ukrainian territorial integrity as I recommended at the time would have had real impact when Putin moved on Crimea in February and March. A sign that there would be real consequences would have split his elites as they pondered the loss of their coveted assets in New York and London.

Then in April and May, the supply of defensive military weaponry would have forestalled the invasion currently under way, or at least raised its price considerably and thereby made the Russian public a factor in the Kremlin's decision-making process much earlier. Those like me who called for such aid at the time were called warmongers and policy makers again sought dialogue with Putin. And yet war arrived regardless, as it always does in the face of weakness.

As one of the pioneers of the analogy and the ominous parallels, I feel the irony in how it quickly went from scandal to cliché to compare Putin to Hitler in the media, for better and for worse. Certainly Putin's arrogance and language remind us more and more of Hitler, as do the rewards he's reaped from them. For this he can thank the overabundance of Chamberlains in the halls of power today—and there is no Churchill in sight. War comes from weakness, not strength.

As long as it is easy, as long as Putin collects his triumphs without resistance, he gains more support. He took Crimea with barely a shot fired. He flooded Eastern Ukraine with agents and weaponry while Europe dithered. The oligarchs who might have pressured Putin at the start of his Ukrainian adventure are now war financiers with no graceful exit. So many bridges have been burned that the Kremlin's pressure points now are harder to reach.

The humiliating failure of the two peace agreements signed in Minsk proved that leaders of the free world simply refuse to admit that there is no dealing with Putin the way they deal with one another. There is no mutually beneficial business as usual. He exploits and abuses every opening and feels no obligation to operate by the rule of law or human rights inside or outside of Russia. Putin is a lost cause and Russia will also be a lost cause until he is gone. It was an error from the start to treat Putin like any other leader, but now there are no more excuses.

Putin won't back down or be kicked out of Ukraine until credible threats to his power create a split among his elites and advisors. Right now they have no incentive to bet against him. Putin protects them and their assets while the free world they so enjoy living in has made no moves that would finally force them to choose between their riches and Putin. Changing that calculus is the only nonmilitary way to protect Ukraine—and wherever Putin goes next to find new enemies to feed into the propaganda machine that keeps him in power at home.

Obama' and Europe's leaders still want to play by the rules even after Putin ripped up the rule book and threw the shreds in their faces. Sanctioning a few of Putin's political hacks is a joke and the Kremlin's elites are right to laugh. To take a phrase from the aptly titled *All the President's Men*, "Follow the money!" Sanction the elites who support Putin, go after all the family members they use to hide their assets abroad, and scrutinize their companies. Putin's oligarchs openly support an administration that directly sponsors terrorists in Ukraine; surely there are ways to go after them and their assets. If existing laws are inadequate to deal with billionaire thugs who enable a dangerous regime, write new ones. And do it quickly.

The Russian military commanders, the ones in the field, are not fools. They are aware that NATO is watching and could blow them to bits in a moment. They rely on Putin's aura of invincibility, which grows every day the West refuses to provide Ukraine with military support. Those commanders must be made to understand that they are facing an overwhelming force, that their lives are in grave danger, that they can and will be captured and prosecuted. To make this a credible threat requires immediate military aid, if not yet the "boots on the ground" everyone but Putin is so keen to avoid. If NATO nations continue to refuse to send lethal aid to Ukraine it will be yet another green light to Putin.

Once again, Putin lies about small things while carrying out his larger threats and goals. He denied there were ever Russian troops in Crimea for a year and then in a Russian documentary aired on March 16, 2015, proudly described deploying thousands of Russian special forces to the Ukrainian peninsula. Of course no one could pretend to be shocked since it had been known practically from the beginning, thanks to satellite photography combined with reporters, bloggers, and locals on social media posting photos of Russian troops and weapons. It should teach us a lesson about what sort of human being he is. If he has a goal, any lies, crimes, or violence needed to achieve that goal are perfectly acceptable and should be expected. After all, he told you what he was going to do. You don't get to complain about how he does it. This is also how Putin has run Russia for fifteen years.

The same circumstances are unfolding with the far larger Russian force in Eastern Ukraine today, which is only growing despite the latest "Minsk II" cease-fire charade. Between "cease-

fires” the Russia-backed forces took hundreds of square kilometers more of Ukrainian territory and created hundreds of new casualties. The death toll is now well over six thousand. In a few more months Putin will probably admit to that, too, and perhaps pin medals on the missile crew that shot down MH17. Why not? He enjoys flaunting his lies in the faces of his victims and the leaders of the free world who refuse to protect them. In the same documentary, Putin said he’d been ready to put Russia’s nuclear arsenal at the highest level of alert over Crimea. He says things like this because he knows the impact it will have in the West. The people and leaders of the free world that brought down the Soviet empire have forgotten what saber rattling sounds like.

Putin is no master strategist. He’s an aggressive poker player facing weak opposition from a Western world that has become so risk averse that it would rather fold than call any bluff, no matter how good its cards are. In the end, Putin is a Russian problem, of course, and Russians must deal with how to remove him. He and his repressive regime, however, are supported directly and indirectly by the free world due to this one-way engagement policy. We must recall the painful memories about the fatal dangers of appeasing a dictator, of disunity in the face of aggression, and of greedily grabbing at an ephemeral peace while guaranteeing a lasting war.

As always when it comes to stopping dictators, with every delay the price goes up. Western leaders have protested over the potential costs of action in Ukraine at every turn only to be faced with the well-established historical fact that the real costs of inaction are always even higher. Now the only options left are risky and difficult, and yet they must be tried. The best reason for acting to stop Putin today is brutally simple: it will only get harder tomorrow.