



After Deterrence: Implications of the Russia-Ukraine War for East Asia

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On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, launching the artillery and missile attacks in the eastern, southern, and northern regions of Ukraine, which marked the largest military operation in Europe since World War II. Russia's invasion occurred two days after Vladimir Putin officially recognized the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in the Donbas region as independent states, and nine days after he held a summit with German Prime Minister Olaf Scholz, during which he announced the beginning of Russian troops' withdrawal from the Ukrainian border. Russia aggressively deployed over 100,000 troops along its border in April and November last year on the pretext of holding military exercises and subsequently demanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to suspend the accession of former Soviet nations into the organization and to cease NATO-led military exercises in Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia. Eventually, Russia chose war in Ukraine.¹

Since the escalation of the Ukraine crisis last November, leading domestic and foreign policy research institutes have analyzed Putin's intentions, strategic calculations, future prospects, and the implications of the crisis in Northeast Asia.² However, few studies have identified the crisis as the

¹ Sullivan, Becky. 2022. "Russia's at war with Ukraine. Here's how we got here." *NPR*, February 24; Park, Joung Ho, Min Hyun Jeong, and Boo Kyun Kang. 2022. "The Ukraine Crisis and the Russia-U.S. Conflict" *KIEP World Economy Focus*, February 4.

<Maeil Business Newspaper>. 2022. "Russia is About to Invade Ukraine." February 22.

² Schneider, William. 2021. "Deter Russia by Arming NATO Allies." *Wall Street Journal*, December 9; Jones, Seth G. and Philip G. Wasielewski. 2022. "Russia's possible Invasion of Ukraine." CSIS; Cordesman, Anthony H and, Grace Hwang. 2022. "NATO and the Ukraine: Reshaping NATO to Meet the Russian and Chinese Challenge." CSIS; Kagan, Robert. 2022. "What we can expect after Putin's conquest of Ukraine." *The Washington Post*, February 21; Hass, Ryan. 2022. "Learning the right lessons from Ukraine for Taiwan." Brookings Institution; Shim, Sung Eun. 2021. "The Status of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Prospects." National Assembly Research Service, 1907; Hong, Wan Seok. 2022. "Geopolitical conflict between the U.S. and Russia over Ukraine: Causes, Characteristics, Implications." Sejong Institute;

U.S. and NATO's extended deterrence failure. This Issue Briefing examines the implications of the Ukraine crisis on East Asia with a focus on weakened U.S. deterrence in the region. Focusing on the "fait accompli" strategy and the "feasibility of punishment" as a main variable, which are recently examined in the international security literature, this article explains the background in which Russia was able to once again embark on a bold provocation, jumping several steps up the Escalation Ladder³, after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Furthermore, it looks into the possibility in which the U.S. failure to deter Russia may give a wrong signal to North Korea and China in East Asia.

I. Russia's Fait Accompli Strategy and Deterrence Failure

The Russia-Ukraine war is, in several respects, a reminder of the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin then emphasized that he would not attempt to address the problem by applying military force. Nonetheless, he pursued annexation through a referendum with an illegal government set up by pro-Russian separatist forces. Despite the fact that the Russian army sided with the separatists to seize control of major Ukrainian facilities, airports, and military bases, Russia claimed that this was the undertaking of local resident militias.⁴ Even during the recent crisis, which erupted over Ukraine's bid to join NATO, Russia underscored its commitment to negotiation and probation of force and subsequently withdrew its troops. However, Russia recognized separatist forces in the Donbas region as independent states out of the blue and allowed Russian military encroachment on Ukrainian territory in the name of a peacekeeping operation.

Putin's moves correspond to Mearsheimer's "limited aims strategy." Under this strategy, the challenger minimizes its damage and avoids an all-out-war by abruptly occupying only a portion of the enemy's territory, while forcing the opponent to engage in war of attrition that requires the latter to pay enormous costs if it decides to respond.⁵ Dan Altman calls this the "fait accompli strategy." On a paper in which he studied 151 cases of international territorial disputes from 1918 to 2018, Altman argues that upon World War II, the number of disputes aimed at seizing the entire enemy territory significantly decreased. He notes that this trend has been more pronounced since 1975. For example, 39% of the 151 disputes comprised of attempts to occupy "uninhabited land" and 41% were attacks on areas that were not defended by opposing regular forces. The ratios for each, respectively, were 28% and 31% before 1980; the numbers sharply increased to 60% since then. This means that Putin's attempt to revise the status quo via fait accompli has become a fairly common move in international disputes in the 21st century.⁶

Park, Joung Ho, Min Hyun Jeong, and Boo Kyun Kang. 2022. "The Ukraine Crisis and the Russia-U.S. Conflict" *KIEP World Economy Focus*. February 4.

³ Kahn, Herman, 1965, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. New York: Praeger.

⁴ Ko, Jae-nam. 2014. "The Main Issues and International Implications of the Ukraine Crisis." *Analysis on International Issues* 11. The Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security.

Shin, Sung-won. 2014. "The Impact of the Ukraine Crisis on the International Order and Northeast Asia." *Analysis on International Issues* 20. The Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security.

⁵ Mearsheimer, John J. 1983. *Conventional Deterrence*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs 79-2. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

⁶ Altman, Dan. 2020. "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm." *International Organization* 74, 3: 516. Cambridge University Press.

Provided that the challenger deploys a *fait accompli* strategy against the defender, which maintains a deterrent posture by drawing a red line, the latter will face tremendous challenge in preparing countermeasures. For example, during the 1948 Berlin Blockade, the Soviet Union placed “tripwire” forces to block and protect roads leading to Berlin. Moscow wanted to compel the U.S., Britain, and France to renounce their jurisdiction over West Berlin. However, the U.S. neutralized the Soviet red line by sending supplies via airlift. In order to cease the Berlin Airlift, the Soviet Union would have had to shoot down Western Allies’ planes, which most likely to escalate the crisis into an all-out-war. Altman argues that when the challenger adopts a *fait accompli* strategy, the issue of whether or not the defender has the strong resolve to punish the challenger no longer remains an important question. He claims that the defender’s “threats to retaliate for clear-cut uses of forces” of the challenger becomes much more significant matter.⁷

II. Why Failure? Limited “Feasibility of Punishment”

The *fait accompli* strategy provides the challenger with a way to circumvent the defender’s red line and its deterrence posture. However, from the perspective of the defender, the strategy ultimately boils down to the question of whether the defender is equipped with the ability to follow through on the threat. On the basis of Altman’s studies, deterrence fails not because the defender lacks the willingness to use its force to maintain the status quo; it fails because the defender lacks the “ability” to craft a sophisticated response to punish challenges’ acts of cleverly circumventing its deterrence posture.

Recent research refers to this ability as the “ability to follow through”⁸ or the “feasibility of punishment.”⁹ In order for the defender to acquire this, it should be equipped with “rapid deployment capability” (military feasibility) and “ability to implement policies of punishment” (political feasibility). In other words, there are two capacities required for the defender to buttress deterrence when the challenger attempts to revise the status quo in a grey area, adjacent to the defender’s red line – “force projection capability” in order to quickly repel challenges using effective punitive measures that match the level of provocation and “political capability” to overcome domestic political opposition and immediately execute punishment measures.

If the defender lacks either the rapid force projection or the policy implementation capabilities, it will be unable to impose an “unacceptable cost” on the challenger in the event of deterrence failure. In this case, the challenger is not mandated to pay anything despite its use of *fait accompli* strategy and will, in turn, achieve its strategic goals. Therefore, if the defender signals the challenger that it

⁷ Altman, Dan. 2018. “Advancing without Attacking: The Strategic Game around the Use of Force,” *Security Studies* 71, 1: 73.

⁸ McManus, Roseanne W. 2017. *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Kim, Yang Gyu. 2019. “After Deterrence: Policy Choices during Crises of Conventional and Nuclear Direct Deterrence Failure.” Ph.D. Diss., Florida International University. 4338.

Kim, Yang Gyu and Félix E. Martín. 2021. “At the Brink of Nuclear War: Feasibility of Retaliation and the U.S. Policy Decisions During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis,” *All Azimuth* 10, 2: 125-147.

Kim, Yang Gyu. 2021. “The Feasibility of Punishment and the Credibility of Threats: Case Studies on the First Moroccan and the Rhineland Crises.” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 19, 3.

lacks the appropriate military and political feasibilities of punishment, the challenger will be able to boldly attempt to change the status quo.

We can reinterpret the Ukraine war from this point of view. U.S. President Joe Biden strongly warned Putin three times; Biden claimed that the U.S. would respond with “strong economic and other measures in the event of military escalation,”¹⁰ that Russian military invasion will be met with “a swift, severe, and united response from the U.S. and our Allies,”¹¹ and that the U.S. will “respond decisively and impose swift and severe costs”¹² should Russia invade Ukraine. This clearly shows that the U.S. used the strategy of deterrence to prevent Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

If the head of state repeatedly draws a red line via public statements, a failure to follow through on the warning will be met with high “audience costs.” Therefore, this tactic has the effect of consolidating the defender’s willingness to punish. In particular, when an elected head of a democratic state intentionally increases the audience cost, the credibility of the threat increases; so does the chance of successful deterrence.¹³ In this respect, President Biden made his best effort to prevent Russia from attacking Ukraine. In fact, he was not left with many policy alternatives to choose from during a time in which the administration has to minimize the economic impact of the Ukraine crisis ahead of the mid-term elections.¹⁴

Then, why did Putin ignore Biden’s warning and invade Ukraine? Many of the aforementioned reports state that Ukraine involves significant geopolitical security interests for Russia. Furthermore, Putin was desperate to recover domestic support during a time in which his approval rating continues to plummet in the aftermath of international economic sanctions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Experts also note that Putin, pursuant of Russian hegemony, strived to demonstrate Russia’s presence and significance to the U.S. and NATO. If so, is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine overdetermined? Was Putin so strongly determined that no matter what policy the U.S. implemented, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was inevitable?

Taking into account the feasibility of punishment, this does not seem to be the case. First, the Biden administration preemptively ruled out the use of military power. When asked on December 9th whether U.S. troops would independently enter Ukraine if Russia decides to invade, Biden ruled out the possibility, stating that the option is “not on the table.”¹⁵ The administration’s understanding that major national security interests was not at stake in defending Ukraine, the lack of domestic support for the overseas deployment of U.S. military forces, and Biden’s own principle of non-intervention are possibly the key reasons behind Biden’s reluctance towards the use of military force.¹⁶ Biden

¹⁰ Gomez, Justin. 2021. “Biden warns of ‘severe consequences’ if Putin moves on Ukraine.” *ABC News*, December 9.

¹¹ Liptak, Kevin. 2022. “Biden predicts Russia ‘will move in’ to Ukraine, but says ‘minor incursion’ may prompt discussion over consequences.” *CNN*, January 19.

¹² Powell, Tori B. 2022. “Biden warns Putin U.S. will ‘impose swift and severe costs on Russia’ if Ukraine is invaded.” *CBS News*, February 25.

¹³ Fearon, James D. 1994. “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes.” *The American Political Science Review* 88, 3, American Political Science Association.

¹⁴ Mitchell, Lincoln. 2022. “Russia and Ukraine’s conflict isn’t Biden’s fault. But many voters won’t see it that way.” *NBC News*, February 25.

¹⁵ Gomez, Justin. 2021. “Biden warns of ‘severe consequences’ if Putin moves on Ukraine.” *ABC News*, December 9.

¹⁶ Usher, Barbara Plett. 2022. “Ukraine conflict: Why Biden won’t send troops to Ukraine.” *BBC News*, February 25.

was also concerned that sending U.S. troops could lead to a “world war.”¹⁷ In this context, it can be evaluated that the Biden administration’s decision was based on prudent consideration on various levels. However, this, in turn, resulted in the U.S. abandoning its strategic ambiguity toward Russia.¹⁸ In other words, the U.S. itself vowed to not build rapid projection capabilities necessary for strengthening its deterrence posture against Russia.

Second, the U.S. did not support military equipment to Ukraine to help prevent or effectively retaliate against Russia’s invasion. Reports released in the past two months before Russia’s invasion show that Russia deployed a squadron of Su-25SM ground-attack aircrafts, Tu-22M bombers, and S-400 long-range surface-to-air missiles on the border, signaling that Russia would use artillery and air force to support its ground force operations.¹⁹ As Ukraine lacks the capacity to retaliate against such attacks, the reports emphasized that the U.S. and NATO should immediately provide Ukraine with weapon systems such as air defense, anti-tank, and anti-ship systems.²⁰ In fact, similar policy suggestions were already repeatedly made since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The U.S. government, however, did not move forward, fearing that it would provoke Russia. Furthermore, the U.S. was concerned with the possibility of technology falling into Russian hands and had doubts over Ukraine’s ability to operate the systems.²¹ Alexander Vindman, former Director for European Affairs for the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), pointed out that even if Ukraine lacked the capacity to properly utilize advanced U.S. weapons, the presence of the weapons itself would have altered Russia’s calculations.²²

Third, the Biden administration has demonstrated incompetence in dealing with domestic political issues since taking office. A January 20th poll found that the Biden administration’s approval rating was 43% and that 36% of the respondents strongly disapprove of his performance. While progressives were disappointed that the administration had been too slow in executing important changes, conservatives criticized that he was moving too far left, to the extent of betraying American values.²³ The Biden administration went all out to get the COVID-19 pandemic under control, getting millions of Americans vaccinated. However, its pandemic response remains in a rough place with the surge of the Omicron variant. Biden’s Build Back Better Framework, a massive social-spending bill, has seen no progress with two Democrats standing in its way. Not to mention, the public has long been concerned with Biden’s senility, which has been in question since the presidential elections. As such, the public has increasingly lost faith over his leadership.²⁴ While it is difficult to verify how

¹⁷ Finn, Teaganne. 2022. “Biden warns Americans in Ukraine to leave, says sending troops to evacuate would be ‘world war.’” *NBC News*, February 11.

¹⁸ Vindman, Alexander. 2022. “America Could Have Done So Much More to Protect Ukraine.” *The Atlantic*, February 24.

¹⁹ Atlantic Council. 2022. “Russia Crisis Military Assessment: What would a ground offensive against Ukraine look like? Watch the skies.” February 9.

²⁰ Jones, Seth G. and Philip G. Wasielewski. 2022. “Russia’s possible Invasion of Ukraine.” CSIS; Schneider, William. 2021. “Deter Russia by Arming NATO Allies.” *Wall Street Journal*, December 9.

²¹ Dilanian, Ken, Dan De Luce and Courtney Kube. 2022. “Why didn’t the U.S. and allies provide Ukraine with a better air defense system?” *NBC News*, February 24.

²² Vindman, Alexander. 2022. “America Could Have Done So Much More to Protect Ukraine.” *The Atlantic*, February 24.

²³ Milligan, Susan. 2022. “Why is Joe Biden So Unpopular?” *U.S. News*, January 21.

²⁴ Ball, Molly and Brian Bennet. 2022. “How the Biden Administration Lost Its Way.” *Time*, January 20.

important of a factor Biden's poor performance in executing policies he promised to deliver, criticized for its lack of decisiveness and drive, is for Putin, it is clearly a factor that undermines the overall credibility of U.S. deterrence.

Therefore, it is evident that the Biden administration's efforts to prevent Russia's invasion of Ukraine is limited in terms of its feasibility of punishment to deter Russia's fait accompli strategy. However, Ukraine is not the only country in which U.S. maintains deterrence. Therefore, potential challengers in confrontation with the U.S. in other regions are bound to recognize weakened U.S. deterrence as an important change, regardless of U.S. intentions.

III. After Deterrence Failure: China, North Korea, and the U.S.

What are the implications of the Ukraine war in East Asia? Undeniably, the war rings a bell for China and its complex relations with Taiwan. Should Taiwan declare independence and cross over the Chinese red line, just like Ukraine pushed for NATO membership, how will China respond? If Russia yet again achieves its goals, similarly to the 2014 annexation of the Crimea, and Putin's fait accompli strategy becomes the new status quo due to the lack of NATO and the Western allies' firm response, China is likely to follow in Russia's footsteps and try its version of fait accompli tactics in Taiwan.²⁵ For example, China could occupy islands such as the Pratas Islands, the Penghu Islands, or the Mazhu Islands located in Taiwan's peripheries.²⁶

North Korea may similarly interpret the situation. In particular, it is likely to launch bolder provocations on the Korean Peninsula to enhance its bargaining power as Biden is unlikely to address his limited political feasibility problem in a short period of time. Granted, there are few regions in South Korea where North Korea can successfully launch an abrupt encroachment while avoiding all-out war via a fait accompli strategy. However, if North Korea is confident that the U.S. will not engage in strong military retaliation due to its limited feasibility of punishment, Pyongyang may initiate an armed provocations qualitatively different from the previous ones to flaunt its advanced military power and enhance the internal solidarity. For example, the North could launch intercontinental ballistic missile tests, additional nuclear tests, artillery attacks on island areas such as Yeonpyeong Island, or attack and seize maritime warships and reconnaissance assets such as the ROKS *Cheonan* or the USS *Pueblo*. Even if North Korea decides to undertake hostile provocations, there are not many additional retaliatory measures that the U.S. can impose on North Korea, which already faces strict economic sanctions.

However, for Washington, Taiwan and Korea are not equivalent to Ukraine. For instance, consider the military expenditures of the U.S, China, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, and Ukraine. The military expenditure ratios of the six countries, respectively, is approximately 77 : 25 : 6 : 4.5 : 0.6 as of 2020, with the U.S. spending 7.7 trillion won, China 2.5 trillion won, Russia spending 4.5 billion

²⁵ Baev Pavel K. et al. 2022. "Around the halls: Implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine." Brookings Institution; Osnos, Evan. 2022. "What Is China Learning from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine?" *The New Yorker*, February 24.

²⁶ Blackwill, Robert D. and Philip Zelikow. 2021. "Three Scenarios for A Military Conflict over Taiwan." *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War*: 32-33. Council on Foreign Relations.

won, Taiwan spending 12 billion won, and Ukraine spending 6 billion dollars.²⁷ The gap between China and Taiwan is larger than that of Russia and Ukraine. However, it should be noted that Taiwan is the U.S.’ ninth largest trade partner (Ukraine is 67th) and maintains a key position in the global value chain. Just as Ukraine is not a NATO ally, Taiwan is not an official U.S. ally. However, the U.S. upholds strategic ambiguity through the Taiwan Relations Act with Taiwan, unlike with Ukraine.²⁸ On the other hand, South Korea is a military ally of the U.S., houses the U.S. Forces Korea, and is equipped with various high-tech information assets, air defense systems, and rapid force deployment capabilities. In addition, just like the catastrophic consequences of the Bay of Pigs invasion shaped the John F. Kennedy administration’s determined response in the course of the subsequent Cuban missile crisis, deterrence failure in the Ukraine crisis could motivate Washington to take firm response in potential conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region.²⁹ Above all, Taiwan and South Korea possess robust military and political feasibilities of punishment that surpass those of Ukraine, in addition to the U.S. capabilities.

The question is whether China and North Korea can accurately estimate the strength of deterrence posture of the U.S. alliance system in East Asia. Therefore, it is important to send clear signals to China and North Korea in order to prevent them from miscalculating the deterrence capability of the U.S. alliance system in East Asia and pursue reckless provocations on Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula. In this context, South Korea should cooperate with U.S. allies in the region, deduce scenarios of a *fait accompli* strategies that China and North Korea are likely to pursue, and enhance its feasibility of punishment and demonstrate its capabilities.

On the other hand, the extent of Russia’s success in Ukraine will inevitably impact the calculations of Beijing and Pyongyang. Ukraine’s performance in defending its territories against the Russian invasion so far has exceeded expectations, considering that its military expenditure is a tenth the size of Russia’s. Additionally, as Spring comes, the Rasputitsa is likely to slow Russian advance significantly. Furthermore, urban warfare in key cities is likely to take the shape of attrition warfare.³⁰ In other words, it is likely that deterrence failure will not necessarily lead to the defense failure; Russia may not be able to achieve its strategic goal despite paying the gargantuan costs throughout the war. In that case, it will be difficult for China and North Korea, observing the situation, to launch hasty provocations in the region. As such, the Ukrainian crisis is by no means a “mere incident halfway across the world.”³¹ ■

²⁷ Da Silva, Diego Lopes, Nan Tian, and Alexandra Marksteiner. 2021. “Trends in World Military Expenditure 2020.” SIPRI.

²⁸ Hass, Ryan. 2022. “Learning the right lessons from Ukraine for Taiwan.” Brookings Institution.

²⁹ Jervis, Robert and Snyder Jack L. 1991. *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland*. 36-39. Oxford University Press;

Baev Pavel K. et al. 2022. “Around the halls: Implications of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.” Brookings Institution.

³⁰ Jones, Seth G. and Philip G. Wasielewski. 2022. “Russia’s possible Invasion of Ukraine.” CSIS.

³¹ Ko, Dong-wook. 2022. “[Ukraine Invasion] Lee Jae-myung, “This is happening in a different country around the world, but the economic development of Korea is at risk.” *Yonhap News Agency*. February 24.

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