

The utter necessity of a Russian defeat
Stephen Blank (Opinion Contributor) - The Hill



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From a Western Clausewitzian standpoint, there is no longer any political justification for Russia's aggression against Ukraine other than to allow Russian President Vladimir Putin to save face.

But from Putin and his supporters' perspective on Clausewitz, that is more than a sufficient justification for continuing this war.

Putin has long since morphed into a contemporary version of a [Shakespearean villain](#) who is in blood so steeped that to go back would be as tiresome as to go o'er.

Indeed, Putin and his toadies are busily making reckless nuclear threats in the belief that such threats will frighten the West into stopping the war with Russian troops on Ukrainian soil. In other words, they are exploiting [Nixon's madman theory](#) to terrify Westerners with nuclear threats.

Unfortunately, too many Western experts are arguing that [we have to save Russia or Putin's face lest the humiliation of defeat drive him to escalate](#). Alternatively, they argue that we must [negotiate the future of European security with Russia](#).

To put it starkly, they are all too willing to sacrifice Ukrainian territory and sovereignty to relieve their anxiety about escalation. Moreover, they also seem to harbor the strange idea that Western and U.S. deterrents are inherently ineffectual and immoral, if not absent, even though they have no proof of these defects in that deterrent.

In fact, Putin has no "off-ramp" save victory, which is increasingly unlikely unless fearful Western leaders coerce Ukraine into surrender. That outcome not only undermines Ukraine's confidence in the West; it also validates Putin's strategy that

the West lacks the nerve to defend its interests and values in the face of his nuclear threats.

Neither would such a program bring about peace — quite the contrary. Putin or his successors could spin that outcome as a victory and use it to provide a basis for renewed campaigns against Ukraine and Europe.

After all, he has sought for over 20 years to subvert and now destroy any idea of Ukrainian statehood. Espousing the approach of preventing a decisive Ukrainian victory also makes it impossible to hold any Russians accountable for the economic devastation wreaked on Ukraine or the genocidal crimes committed across Ukraine at Moscow's orders.

West underestimated 'brutality and ambitions' of Russia's Putin, former NATO chief says. Behind much of this commentary lies the implicit or explicit canards that [we have no vital interests at stake in European security](#) in this war or that [NATO or Washington is somehow to blame for this war](#).

These arguments, though dressed up in the clothes of supposed realism, are also utterly groundless. Putin himself has admitted that they are canards. Discussing Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO, he admitted that these moves “[do not provide a direct threat](#).”

Nevertheless, he and his government are planning military moves because they cannot let go of the self-serving narrative that saturates Russian media about the alleged NATO threat.

While we obviously must take nuclear threats seriously; we must, in Voltaire's words, “[cultivate our garden](#),” i.e. European security. We must remind Putin that we too have a deterrent, both conventional and nuclear, and that if he launches a nuclear attack on Ukraine or Europe to save his power and system, it will be the last thing he ever does.

Moreover, if there is to be genuine security in Europe, including Russia, it is necessary to foreclose Russia's option of a renewed Russian empire. A Russian empire is sustainable only through an autocracy like Putin's that is both wholly criminalized and consumed by the ideology of Russia as being under permanent threat from NATO.

Empire intrinsically presupposes an unending state of war across Eurasia since Russia's neighbors refuse to renounce their sovereignty and territory. And Russia clearly cannot sustain either war or empire.

Therefore, we must reject the advice of those who would gladly sacrifice Ukraine's vital interests to their anxiety about Putin losing face. A Russian defeat is necessary not just to enhance Ukraine and Europe's security but also to allow the Russian people to confront, as Germany has done, their history and responsibility for the crimes committed in the past and the present in Russia's name.

Only on that basis will Russia have a chance to reclaim its European vocation and enrich the lives of both its citizens and its neighbors.

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