



Episode 1: Origins of the War In Ukraine

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John Mearsheimer: Putin felt that Russia faced an existential threat. He had to deal with that threat. And the United States and the Europeans were doing nothing to negotiate a way to avoid war. The West is leading Ukraine down the Primrose path. The Israelis are executing a genocide in Gaza. It's not China's fault that it wants to be powerful. So if you get into trouble and you dial 911, there's nobody at the other end.

Hi, this is John Mearsheimer. And I'm here today to make my first video on my new YouTube channel. And the subject I'd like to talk about is the origins of the war in Ukraine. That war began on February 24th of 2022. And of course, the war continues on. Indeed, it's been longer than World War I. And I want to talk about its origins. And in particular, I'm interested in the question of why the Russians were not deterred and why they actually attacked on February 24th, 2022. And this is essentially a question of conventional deterrence because the attack was a conventional attack. Nuclear weapons were not involved here. Nuclear deterrence was not at play. It's a question of conventional deterrence. And again, why were the Russians not deterred?

Now, this is a very interesting subject to me because the war is important, but also because I actually wrote a book on conventional deterrence. During the Cold War, the whole question of whether or not the Soviet Union, or more generally the Warsaw Pact, would attack NATO, was an issue of great importance. And people paid attention to the question of when, or under what circumstances, the Russians might attack against NATO. And I actually wrote my PhD dissertation on the subject of conventional deterrence. And my first book, which grew out of my dissertation, is entitled *Conventional Deterrence*. So I've thought a lot about this subject. And because the NATO Warsaw Pact situation from the Cold War bears a lot of resemblance to the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, I think I have a lot to say, or I should say, I think my theory has a lot to say about the origins of the Ukraine war. So what I'd like to do today, is I'd first like to lay out my theory of conventional deterrence, leaving aside the whole question of the Ukraine War – just explain to you how I think about conventional deterrents. And then once I finish that task, switch gears and talk about the Ukraine war, talk about what happened

on February 24th, 2022, and what has happened subsequently. And in essence, marry my theory of conventional deterrence to the Ukraine war.

Now, let me start by talking about conventional deterrents. And the first point I want to make, and this is a terribly important point, is that when you think about conventional deterrence, you have to focus on the political variable and the military variable. And you're probably saying to yourself, what exactly does he mean? When I talk about the political variable, it's very important to understand that there are political forces that push a state to go to war. And the question of how powerful those political forces are really matters for purposes of understanding deterrence. So you have this political variable and then you have a military variable. And the military variable is all about how well you will do on the battlefield. Once you're engaged in the fight militarily, how likely are you to succeed? What sorts of costs will you have to pay? That's what the military variable is all about. The political variable deals with those broader political forces that are pushing you to contemplate going to war. And it's very important to understand that you have taken into account both the military and the political variables. And this, by the way, this relationship between politics and military considerations is reflected in Clausewitz's very famous dictum that war is an extension of politics by other means. War, meaning the military variable, is an expansion of politics, by other means. So we have to always keep in mind that there are these two variables at play. And we have to think not only about each variable by itself, but how they relate to each other.

Now, let me start by talking about the military variable. My argument is that when states think about going to war – and here we're talking about a large-scale conventional war, you want to keep that in mind. Remember I said before, what motivated me to study this issue was the NATO Warsaw Pact conventional balance during the Cold War. And here we're talking about the balance of power between Russia's conventional forces and Ukraine's conventional forces back in February of 2022. So when a country – whether it's the Warsaw Pact thinking about attacking NATO or Russia thinking about attacking Ukraine – when it thinks about the military considerations at play, it focuses on the particular strategy that it might employ to win the war. And my argument is that a state that's thinking about attacking another state in a major conventional war has three strategies that it can choose from. One is what I call "Blitzkrieg", two is what I call "attrition strategy", and three is what I call a "limited aim strategy". Now let me unpack what I mean when I talk about each one of those strategies.

An attrition strategy and the Blitzkrieg strategy are both aimed at producing a decisive victory. A Blitzkrieg is designed to produce a quick and decisive victory. Think about the Germans invading France in 1940. On May 10, 1940, the Wehrmacht invaded France. It quickly overruns France and then pushes the British Army off the beaches at Dunkirk. This is a classic Blitzkrieg. Blitzkriegs produce quick and decisive victories. An attrition strategy in contrast produces a slow, a protracted, but decisive victory. So it's important to understand that with both a Blitzkrieg and an attrition strategy, you are pursuing decisive victory, defeating the other side almost, if not completely. The third strategy is a limited aim strategy. And there, a state does not pursue a decisive victory. What it does is it simply conquers

territory in that rival state. It goes to war and lops off or conquers a small piece of the other side's territory, and then it moves to a defensive strategy. This is why it's called a limited aim strategy and not a strategy that pursues decisive ends, which is what Blitzkrieg and an attrition strategy do. So these are the three strategies that a state can choose among.

Now, how do we rank order these strategies? What do these three strategies say about the likelihood of deterrence succeeding or failing? My argument is that if a state thinks it can launch a Blitzkrieg that will produce a quick and decisive victory, deterrence will fail. If it thinks that it has to launch an attrition strategy, it can't win quickly, it's aiming to win decisively, but it can't win quickly, then it will not attack. So an attrition strategy promotes deterrence, and a Blitzkrieg strategy promotes the failure of deterrence. Just to go to World War II, one of the principal reasons that the Germans invaded France in May of 1940 was that they had a Blitzkrieg strategy which they thought would produce a quick and decisive victory. And that's why they went to war, and they were successful. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union a year later, on June 22nd, 1941, they thought that the Blitzkrieg strategy that they had ready to go would produce a quick and decisive victory inside the Soviet Union. Of course, it failed in the Soviet case. And the war evolved into a war of attrition. It's very important to understand that the Germans did not go into the Soviet Union in 1941 thinking they would end up in a war of attrition. If that were the case, I would argue they would not have attacked. They attacked because they thought they had a Blitzkrieg strategy that would provide a war-winning strategy. So you see that Blitzkrieg, because it produces or promises to produce a quick and decisive victory, is a formula for deterrence failure. And I would argue, by the way, that during the Cold War, the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies never gave any thought of attacking into Western Europe because they understood that they could not execute a Blitzkrieg against the NATO forces that would be arrayed against them in the fight. And that's why deterrence was so robust. This is not to deny, of course, that nuclear deterrence mattered as well.

Now, let's go to the limited aim strategy. The limited aim strategy is the easiest strategy to execute because it is limited, which means that all you're doing is grabbing some territory from your adversary. You're not attempting to defeat your adversary decisively. It is a limited strategy. There are limited aims at play. So it is the easiest of the three strategies to execute for sure. But actually it is not ultimately an attractive strategy. And the reason that it is ultimately not an attractive strategy is because you don't defeat the other side decisively and invariably the other side will continue the fight, and you will end up in a war of attrition. It's very important to understand that what I'm saying here is that if you launch a Blitzkrieg and it fails, you'll end up on a war of attrition, and if you launched a limited aim strategy, you'll be successful at first, but it will probably end up turning into a war of attrition, and nobody wants a war of attrition. So there is a powerful incentive to stay away from a limited aim strategy, and there's certainly a powerful incentive to stay away from an attrition strategy. So when those are the two options on the table, you're likely to see deterrence succeed. It's when an army can launch a Blitzkrieg that deterrence is likely to fail. So, this is my story about the military variable.

Now, as I said earlier, you have to take into account the political variable as well. There's no question that any time a country is thinking about going to war, the political variable is going to basically say, we have a very good reason to go to war. By definition, you don't think about launching an attack against an adversary unless you think there is a strong set of political reasons for doing so. Nevertheless, in some cases, the intensity of the political forces that are pushing a state to go to war are extremely great – that a state feels that it has to solve the political problem that is faced with military force. And what happens in cases like that is that states usually go to a limited aim strategy. The set of cases where you see a limited aim strategy lead to deterrence failure. You remember my point when I talked about the military variable was that Blitzkrieg produces deterrence failures. Attrition strategy, deterrence success. limited aims strategy, most of the time, deterrence success. What I'm telling you is when you factor in the political variable, and there are intense pressures to go to war, then the state, if it doesn't have the capability to launch a Blitzkrieg, will launch a limited aim strategy.

And let me give you what I think are the two classic examples of that. One is the 1973 Egyptian attack against the Israelis in the Sinai. The Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal and they grabbed a piece of territory in the Sinai that Israel had controlled up till then and then they shifted to the defensive. It was a clear limited aim strategy. Why did the Egyptians do that? Anwar El-Sadat who was then the president of Egypt felt that it was absolutely essential that the Egyptians used military force against Israel to send a clear message to Israel that they had, meaning the Egyptians, had to get back the Sinai Peninsula. They launched, in October of 1973, this limited aims strategy. They did not launch a Blitzkrieg because there was no way that the Egyptians could defeat the Israelis with a Blitzkrieg strategy. That was off the table. And they did not want to engage in an attrition war if they could avoid it. So they launched the limited aims' strategy.

Same is true with the Japanese when they attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. It was a limited aim strategy. The Japanese understood full well that they could not defeat the United States decisively. They did not have a strategy that would produce decisive victory. But nevertheless, the Japanese felt that they were compelled to attack the United States because the United States was strangling them economically and they had to figure a way to get out of this incredibly difficult situation that they're in. The United States would not negotiate with them. So they decided to launch a war. And again, they did not have a Blitzkrieg strategy. They wanted to avoid a war of attrition. So they launched a limited aim strategy, which is what the Pearl Harbor attack was all about. So you see in the case of Egypt in '73 and the Japanese in 1941, two instances of a state actually pursuing a limited aim strategy. Two cases where deterrence broke down because the attacking forces adopted a limited aim strategy. But the only reason you got a limited aim strategy in those two cases was because the political forces pushing each one of those states to go to war were just so incredibly powerful. But otherwise, as I say, the key to understanding whether or not deterrence fails is whether or not a state that's contemplating war has a Blitzkrieg strategy available or not. In other words, whether it can win a quick and decisive victory. So this is basically my theory of conventional deterrence.

Now what I want to do is switch gears and I want to talk about the Russian decision to invade Ukraine on February 24th, 2022. And of course, my argument is that the Russians could choose among three strategies. They could choose a Blitzkrieg. They could choose an attrition strategy, or they could choose a limited aim strategy. Maybe I shouldn't say they could choose, they could contemplate, it's probably a better way to put it. They could contemplate a Blitzkrieg strategy, an attrition strategy, or a limited aim strategy. The conventional wisdom in the West is that the Russians launched a Blitzkrieg. Let me say a bit more about this. The conventional wisdom in the West is clearly that Vladimir Putin was an aggressor who was interested in conquering all of Ukraine and incorporating it into a greater Russia. And of course, as you know, many people believe that after he was done with Ukraine, he would try to conquer other territory in Eastern Europe and reestablish the Soviet empire. But that's all beside the point, because we're simply concerned here about the question of why Russia attacked Ukraine.

And again, the goal, so the conventional wisdom goes, is that Putin wanted to conquer all of Ukraine – this is another way of saying that Putin was pursuing a decisive victory. And of course, he thought he was going to win a quick and decisive victory. He thought that he had this formidable military instrument, the Russian army, that would quickly overrun the Ukrainian army, end up conquering all of Ukraine, and then incorporating it into a greater Russia. This would be a quick, and decisive, victory. And, of course, as I said to you when I laid out my theory, that if a state thinks that it can affect the Blitzkrieg, then deterrence is going to fail. And if you accept the conventional wisdom about what Putin was up to, it's obvious why deterrence failed and why Russia invaded Ukraine. I disagree with this argument, but before I tell you why, let me note that once the Blitzkrieg failed, and of course, the Blitzkriegs failed in the conventional wisdom, what you got was a war of attrition. And this was the point that I made to you earlier. Remember, I said when a Blitzkrieg fails, it leads to a war of attrition. This is what happened to the Soviets on the Eastern Front in World War II. And so the conventional wisdom goes, this is what happened to the Russians after they invaded Ukraine. The Blitzkrieg failed and we got into a war of attrition.

Why is this argument wrong? First of all, there is no way that the Russian army that went into Ukraine could have come even close to conquering all of Ukraine. It was just too small, the Russian Army, and it was not a high quality military machine. It was not an army that was well-oiled for offensive operations. It was an army that was basically built for a defensive mission. And furthermore, as I said, it was a rather small army. I argue that the Russian army that went into Ukraine had at most 190,000 troops, 190,000. General Syrskyi, who is the head of the Ukrainian military today, argues that the Russians went in with 100,000 troops. There's absolutely no way that the Russians could even come close to conquering all of Ukraine with 100,000 troops or even with 190,000 troops. When the Wehrmacht, the German army, went into Poland in 1939 – and you want to remember that the Wehrmacht was only interested in conquering the western one half of Poland, because the Soviet Union was going to conquer the eastern one half of Poland – when the Wehrmacht went into western Poland, it had 1.5 million men. 1.5 million! And the western half of Poland is much smaller than Ukraine. And again, General Syrskyi says the Russians went in with 100,000 troops. I say they went in,

with at most 190,000 troops. And again, this was not an army that was well suited for offensive military operations. To put it in slightly different terms, this was not the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht was a formidable fighting force that was top-notch when it came to executing offensive armored operations. That was not the Russian Army.

So my first argument against the conventional wisdom, and again, the conventional wisdom is that Russia was bent on achieving a quick and decisive victory, is that they just didn't have an army that was big enough to achieve that goal. The second point I would make to you is that one day after the offensive started, on February 25th, Dmitry Peskov, who was at the time, Putin's principal spokesman, reached out to the Ukrainians and said that the Russians were interested in starting negotiations. Just think about this. One day after the Russians start the war, the Russians reach out to Ukrainians and say they'd like to start negotiations to put an end to the war. This does not fit with the story that Putin was bent on conquering all of Ukraine and incorporating it into a greater Russia. Then what happens over the course of March, this is March 2022, right after the war starts, is that the Ukrainians and the Russians begin to negotiate with each other. And eventually what happens is on the 29th of March, on 29th of March, this is a little over one month after the war starts, negotiations to end the war start in Istanbul. These are the famous Istanbul negotiations that are designed to shut down the war.

Furthermore, and this is very important, as a goodwill gesture the Russians evacuate their military from around the Kiev region and they, in effect, turn the Kiev region over to Ukraine. Again, this does not sound like the Russians and in particular Vladimir Putin were bent on conquering all of Ukraine, winning a decisive victory. And in fact, what happens after March in Istanbul is that the two sides do begin to negotiate. And it's very clear that there are a lot of difficult issues on the table. And it's not clear you would have ever gotten an agreement. But the central agreement on the table is the question of Ukrainian neutrality. And what was going on here is that the Russians just wanted to make sure that Ukraine did not join NATO. They were not interested in conquering all of Ukraine. They did not want Ukraine to turn into a Western bulwark on their border. And that's what this operation was all about. I'll talk more about this in a second. But the point I'm trying to make to you is that given the size of the Russian Army, given the quality of the Russian Army and given the fact that the Russians reach out to the Ukrainians to start negotiations right after the war starts, and then given the fact that those negotiations actually start a little over a month later, it's, in my opinion, almost impossible to sustain the story that the Russians were interested in conquering Ukraine. My final point on this is that those negotiations eventually break down. And as I said, I'm not sure that they ever would have produced a final agreement that would have ended the war back then. But it's not the Russians who walked away from the negotiations. I think it's the Ukrainians who bear the principal responsibility for walking away from the negotiations. And of course what happens then, once the war is not settled in Istanbul, is it evolves into a war of attrition.

Okay, let me give you my view using my theory on what happened that led to the war on February 24th, 2022. The Russians did not launch a Blitzkrieg. I've just tried to give you

some evidence, there's more, but I gave you some of the principal evidence that shows this was not a case of Vladimir Putin turning his army loose to conquer all of Ukraine. No, what Putin did is he launched a limited aim strategy. If you go into Ukraine with 100,000 or 190,000 troops and you withdraw from Kiev as soon as the negotiations in Istanbul starts, you're pursuing a limited aim strategy here. What Putin did was Putin went into Ukraine and he captured a small chunk of territory, inside of Ukraine. And he then told the Ukrainians that he wanted to start negotiating. What's going on here? What's going on here is that Putin believed that NATO's policy of trying to incorporate Ukraine into the Western alliance, the West's policy of trying to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border was an existential threat. The Russians were perfectly clear on this issue from April 2008 forward, and of course April 2008 is when NATO says that Ukraine will become part of the alliance. From April 2008 forward, the Russians are clear this is an existential threat and it's not going to happen.

In December of 2021, January of 2022, and in February of 2022 – these are the three months before the war starts – the Russians go to enormous lengths to try to negotiate with the West to avoid a war. The Russians are not interested in war. This is perfectly clear if you look at the historical record for those three months before the war started. Nevertheless, the West has zero interest in negotiating with the Russians to make sure that a war does not break out over Ukraine. Just go look at the historical record. You'll find hardly any evidence that the West, which believed the Russians might attack, you want to understand that – many people in the West thought that there was a good chance that the Russians would attack. Nevertheless, the West, and here I'm talking mainly about the United States, did virtually nothing to prevent a war. What this meant was that Putin was desperate. He believed that he and his country faced an existential threat and he had to deal with this existential threat. He fully understood that he had no Blitzkrieg option. That was not in the cards. Putin was not running the Wehrmacht. The Russian army was not the Wehrmacht, the Russian army was a defensively oriented army, small in number. It had no capability of winning a decisive victory in Ukraine. So he pursued a limited aim strategy. This is exactly what my theory would predict. The political variable here, the political forces that were pushing Putin to go to war were extremely powerful. Again, Putin felt that Russia faced an existential threat. He had to deal with that threat. And the United States and the Europeans were doing nothing to negotiate a way to avoid war. So he felt he had to use military force. And as I've said, he had no Blitzkrieg option. So what he did was he launched a limited aim strategy. And if you look at the size of the army and if you look at his interest in sending a signal to the Ukrainians to let's start negotiating right after the war starts, you see clearly that this is what he had in mind.

However, as I told you at the beginning of the lecture, the problem with a limited aim strategy is that the other side, the target state, is unlikely to roll over and play dead. It's unlikely to surrender. And indeed, it's likely to continue the fight. And in this case, Ukraine, with help from the West, this includes the Europeans and the United States, and we're talking about with abundant help from the West, the Ukrainians continue the fight against Russia. I believe that one of the principal reasons that the Ukrainians walk away from the Istanbul negotiations, and I believe the West encourages them to do this, is because they believe that

Ukraine, with help from the West, can prevail over the Russians in the long term. Because the Russian army is not that strong, which of course is why it pursued a limited strategy. So the Ukrainians with help from the West continue the war. And what's the end result? The end result is that this limited aim strategy turns into a war of attrition. And of course, as all the viewers know, we are now engaged in a war of attrition with Russia on one side, Ukraine and the West on the other side.

So to sum up here, when you think about what happened on February 24th, 2022, what you want to do is think about this as a case of a failure of conventional deterrence. And as I said before, when you think about conventional deterrence, you have to think about the political variable and the military variable. And when you talk about the military variables, there are three strategies, Blitzkrieg, attrition, and limited aim strategy. And if a potential attacker can pursue a Blitzkrieg strategy, deterrence is likely to fail. And the only time I think you're going to get a state pursuing a limited aim strategy, which is the second-best alternative, but not a great alternative, is when the political forces that call for war are so powerful that a state is willing to risk it and pursue a limited aim strategy. And I think what happened in the case of the Ukraine War, is that the Russians did not have a Blitzkrieg strategy. I know that's the conventional wisdom, but they did not have a Blitzkrieg strategy. They pursued a limited aim strategy. And the reason they pursued a limited- aim strategy is because they thought that they faced an existential threat, that they had to deal with that threat, and they could not deal with the threat through negotiations with the West because the West would just not negotiate. So they had to use military force and they launched this limited attack on February 24th, 2022, which at first began to look like it might work. You want to remember you got negotiations at Istanbul and there are many people who do think there was a good chance those negotiations would have worked had the West not encouraged the Ukrainians to walk away. But the negotiations failed, and here we are in this lengthy war of attrition. And as I said, this is exactly what my argument would expect. That's my story on the origins and also on the conduct of the Ukraine War since February 24th, 2022. Thank you very much for your attention.

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