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Putin Has No Red Lines

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“What are Putin’s red lines?”

This question, asked with growing urgency as Russia loses its war in Ukraine but does not relent in its aggressions, is intended to offer analytical clarity and to guide policy. In reality, it is the wrong question, because “red line” is a bad metaphor. Red lines are red herrings. There are better ways to think about strategy.

“Red lines” implies there are defined limits to the actions that a state — in this case, Russia — is prepared to accept from others. If the West transgresses these limits, Russia will respond in new and more dangerous ways. A red line is a tripwire for escalation. Western diplomacy must seek to understand and “respect” Russia’s red lines by avoiding actions that would cross them. Russia’s red lines thus impose limits on Western actions.

There are three flaws to this reasoning. First, it assumes that red lines are fixed features of a state’s foreign policy. This is almost never the case. What states say, and even believe, that they would not accept can change radically and quickly. In 2012 President Barack Obama said that Syrian use of chemical weapons was a “red line” that would invite “enormous consequences.” Yet when Syria killed hundreds of civilians with the nerve agent Sarin the following year, as numerous watchdog groups reported, the U.S. response was muted. The Taliban’s return to Kabul in August 2021 — an outcome the West had spent two decades and trillions of dollars preventing — was the brightest of red lines until, in the face of changing priorities and a different view of costs and benefits, it suddenly wasn’t.

These are not exceptions. In truth, red lines are nearly always soft, variable and contingent — not etched in geopolitical stone. While national interests, as Henry Temple, Viscount Palmerston, said, may be eternal, the way they manifest themselves as specific commitments will reflect temporary, shifting circumstances — among them, relative power, perceptions of threat, domestic calculations and wider global trends. Diplomacy should therefore seek not to avoid an adversary’s red lines, but to change them.

Creative and assertive strategy does not pre-emptively constrain itself by fear of what the other side might find unacceptable. Rather, it coordinates all the elements of a situation to induce an adversary to accept its goals.

The second flaw of “red line” orthodoxy is that, in fixating on a state’s escalatory response, it considers only the risks and dilemmas this would impose on an adversary, and not those that the escalating state itself faces. For escalation means acting in ways that are more dangerous for everyone, and that had previously been judged too risky to contemplate. Such a decision must take into account the likely costs as well as benefits. Escalation is a choice, not a tripwire — one an adversary can deter by credibly conveying the costs this would incur.

The third flaw is that preoccupation with red lines invites deception. A state will seek to manipulate an adversary’s desire to restrain itself by enlarging the range of interests it claims are “fundamental” and actions it considers “unacceptable.” Fear of escalation thus encourages an escalation of bluff.

Exposing these flaws can help craft better policy. Concerns about Russia’s “red lines” are driven above all by the fear that Russia might resort to nuclear escalation. The West should avert this by deterring Russia rather than by restraining itself — or pressuring Ukraine to do so — for fear of “provoking” Russia. It can do so by communicating the certainty of severe consequences should Russia use nuclear weapons. Russia has tried and failed to impose red lines with nuclear threats several times since the war began — most recently in November, when Ukrainian forces liberated Kherson just six weeks after Vladimir Putin had declared it part of Russia. Ukraine and the West rightly rejected these bluffs, and should continue to do so.

The concept of red lines has its uses. Its origins lie in the study of negotiation, where they define a state’s minimum conditions for an acceptable agreement. If these are not met, the state can walk away. Here, red lines are fixed and other states can find it very useful to discover what they are — as America understood when, for example, it decrypted the Japanese negotiating position before the talks that led to the Washington Naval Treaty in 1922.

But to apply the special case of negotiation — with few parameters and a narrow range of outcomes — to a complex, fluid and much wider geopolitical rivalry is a category error. While the danger of Russian nuclear escalation may rise and should be studied carefully, there is no special, separate category of actions that the West or Ukraine might take that would automatically trigger it. Russia has no red lines: It only has, at each moment, a range of options and perceptions of their relative

risks and benefits. The West should continually aim, through its diplomacy, to shape these perceptions so that Russia chooses the options that the West prefers.

America has done this before. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous nuclear confrontation so far, the Soviet Union's position shifted in a matter of days, ultimately accepting an outcome that favored the West. Had "red lines" thinking been in vogue, America might well have accepted an inferior compromise that weakened its security and credibility.

While Russia is more invested in subordinating Ukraine than it was in deploying missiles to Cuba, the logic is the same. In 1962, America persuaded the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, that removing nuclear weapons from Cuba was, however unpalatable, a better choice than deploying them. Similarly, the West should now aim to persuade Mr. Putin that withdrawing his forces from Ukraine is less perilous than fighting. He will be likely to do so if he understands that a long war threatens his regime — whose preservation seems to be the only thing he values more highly than a subordinated Ukraine — by fatally weakening domestic cohesion or by escalating out of control.

America should focus on three things. First, it should no longer declare that there are measures it will refrain from taking, and weapons systems it will not provide, to support Ukraine. To signal unilateral restraint is to make an unforced concession. Worse, it emboldens Russia to probe for, and try to impose, further limits on U.S. action — making the war more, not less, risky.

Second, America, with its partners, must make clear that time is working against Russia — not in its favor, as Mr. Putin still believes. The West should demonstrate readiness to mobilize, and quickly, its huge economic superiority to enable Ukraine to defeat Russia and to impose further severe sanctions. The military and economic costs to Russia will drain its far more limited resources and place greater strains on the regime.

Third, the West should make clear to a wide range of Russian audiences that it is safe to end the war by leaving Ukraine. An orderly withdrawal is unlikely to lead to regime change, let alone the breakup of Russia. Neither outcome is an official goal of Western policy, and talk of them is unhelpful and even counterproductive. Some in the West will resist the idea of any such reassurance. But if Russia's elites conclude that it is as dangerous for Russia to leave Ukraine as to stay, they have no incentive to press for an end to the war. Reassurance does not mean compromise.

Pursued firmly and resolutely, these diplomatic "shaping operations" in support of Ukraine's military campaign can ensure that Russia's least-bad option aligns with

what the vastly more powerful West wants. Such a strategy is the opposite of accepting red lines. Revealingly, “red lines” is the mirror image of an earlier metaphor used at the start of the war. When Russia looked strong, many proposed giving Mr. Putin an “off-ramp” to persuade him to stop fighting. Now Russia is weaker, they call for Western restraint to persuade him not to fight more recklessly.

Both approaches would reward Russian aggression by shifting Western policy in line with Russia’s preferences. Mr. Putin was not given an off-ramp then, and he should not be allowed to define the limits of Western policy now. Strategy needs rigorous thought, not lazy metaphors.

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