

Cyberspace and War in Ukraine: Prepare for Worse



The central premise of our argument is that Russia and NATO member states will want to avoid a direct military clash at nearly all costs (Putin's desire to protect his regime from imminent collapse might be an exception). If anything, the tragedies of the war in Ukraine reveal the enormous economic and human costs of conventional battles involving the Russian military behemoth. Although the risk of an accidental or unwanted war between Russia and NATO is always present and has increased, both sides will want to reduce it. That is how to interpret Russian President Vladimir [Putin's recent allusion](#) to nuclear war: He rattled the atom in order not to have to use it. Similarly, President Joe

[Biden's warning](#) about the certainty of "World War 3" if Russia attacked NATO was a rhetorical device to reduce its chances. Both sides have signaled that they wish to avoid an epochal war among them; they threaten it in order not to fight it. This is conventional deterrence thinking at its finest. Familiar red lines are reinforced so that all sides can see them plainly amid the crisis.

A large coalition of Western and Western-aligned states (such as Japan and South Korea) have levied economic and financial sanctions against Russia. The country is now possibly the [most heavily sanctioned nation](#) in the world—even more so than North Korea under the reclusive Kim Jong Un's rule. The sanctions go far beyond the targeted [financial penalties](#) that the U.S. Treasury Department has applied to individuals and organizations such as the Russian Internet Research Agency, which it deemed responsible for previous hacking activities, or [those imposed](#) after the SolarWinds incident. They far surpass, too, the scope and effects of the United Kingdom's [diplomatic](#) and [financial penalties](#) in response to the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate's (GRU) poisoning operation (with the banned chemical agent novichok) against its former agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018. The current sanctions regime against Russia is [particularly potent](#) because it has included an extraordinary freeze on central bank assets and the expulsion of some of Russia's largest banks from the global interbank payments system, SWIFT. Hundreds of multinational and mostly Western companies have exited the Russian market or suspended their operations there. The ruble has undergone dramatic price drops not seen since the 1998 financial crisis, which has inflicted economic pain on the general Russian population. The net result of these economic dislocations is an expected drop in Russian gross domestic product of 15 percent in 2022—a decline that would reduce the Russian economy

to [its size in 2007](#) at current prices.