

# Deterrence by Exposure?

## A Study of Declassified Intelligence before Russia's Attack on Ukraine

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### Resumé

Västliga underrättelsetjänster avhelligade och släppte underrättelser till medierna i en omfattning som saknar motstycke före det ryska angreppet på Ukraina 1 februari 2022. Artikeln behandlar arten av de delade underrättelserna och orsakerna till att dessa publicerades, baserat på en idé om "avskräckning genom exponering". Det kalla kriget såg uppkomsten av teorier rörande avskräckning då begreppet fokuserade på kärnvapen, första- och andraslagsförmåga liksom det som handlade om förmågan till ömsesidig ödeläggelse. Emellertid har förändringarna i den internationella säkerhetsmiljön påverkat avskräckningskonceptet. Om planen som byggde på "avskräckning genom exponering" hade fungerat och förhindrat det ryska angreppet hade underrättelsebedömningarna rörande angreppet uppfattats som felaktiga och alarmistiska av allmänheten, samtidigt som det högre syftet hade uppnåtts. Återstår således att teorin ska få möjlighet att påvisa resultat. Med förekomsten av informationskrigföring behöver begreppet avskräckning omdefinieras liksom den del av denna som avser underrättelsetjänst. "Avskräckning genom exponering" kan bli en del av möjligheten att åstadkomma avskräckning i det tjugoförsta århundradet, samtidigt som frågorna infinner sig rörande dess begränsningar liksom möjligheterna att överkomma de hinder som tar utgångspunkt i kriget om sanningen liksom auktoritära regimer.

WESTERN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES declassified and released intelligence to the media in a previously unseen manner before Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022. The article discusses the nature of the shared intelligence as well as the likely reasons for its publication; was the information shared to expose Russian intentions globally and to prevent the attack, or were there some other likely reasons? The study builds around an idea of Deterrence by Exposure. Comparisons to earlier cases, for example the preparations to Iraq War 2002–03, provide further depth to the analysis.

### Analysis Paralysis – Introduction

An unprecedented phenomenon was seen rising in the months before the Russian attack on Ukraine in late-February 2022. Intelligence data and assessments were unclassified and shared publicly in the Western media unlike before. Surely, intelligence had been shared before, for example in 2002–2003 prior to the Iraq War. This time, the nature of the intelligence was, however, slightly different from the much-debated Iraqi WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction). The shared

information ranged from satellite data on troop and material movements<sup>1</sup> to actual assessments that Russia was likely to attack in the coming days.<sup>2</sup> Intelligence shared, for example in the US and Britain, was soon republished by media in smaller states, like Finland.<sup>3</sup> However, like in 2003, war was the chosen course of action, regardless of the published intelligence.

But what was the reason for this? What drove the Western powers, mainly the US and the UK, to share their intelligence in such a way, unlike before? Was the purpose of the public intelligence-sharing to deter Russia from attacking Ukraine by exposing its military manoeuvres and posture, as well as its strategic thinking? If a theory of deterrence by exposure was implemented by sharing the intelligence, why did the attempt to stop Russian aggression fail?

Writer and historian Garrett M Graff looked back at the events before Russia's attack:

For nearly a year prior, US and Western officials had signs of what was coming: a suspicious buildup of Russian troops, intelligence about the Kremlin's plans, statements from President Vladimir Putin himself. Those officials raised increasingly specific public alarms, some of which were based on a novel new strategy of rapidly declassifying and publicizing intelligence in near real-time, and made desperate attempts to avert a war, even as it became more and more clear that Putin was determined to invade.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to study the premises of "deterrence by exposure" and how the nature of shared intelligence was likely intended to support the approach, as well as probable causes for the failure of the theory in practice. Even though the initial purpose, to prevent the attack, failed, there are some other gains from these actions worth discussing.

In the end, a failure is a failure only if we learn nothing from it.

Simultaneously with the published official intelligence, the build-up to the war saw also a notable rise in crowd-sourced open-source intelligence on military affairs. Numerous private think tanks, websites, and individual bloggers were collecting data and sharing their own analysis.<sup>5</sup> This article, however, concentrates on the official, state actor-oriented intelligence. Certainly, the other actors will be studied by the academia, sooner rather than later.

For coherence reasons, the timeline starts from early December 2021. That is when the *Washington Post* first shared US intelligence that "the Kremlin is planning a multi-front offensive as soon as early next year involving up to 175,000 troops".<sup>6</sup> The timeline ends in the week of the attack in February 2022. There are multiple points of interest along the way, like the Russian Strategic Nuclear Exercise (GROM) mid- February etcetera.

In a wider perspective, the relationship between intelligence and media has been studied in abundance recently. Intelligence and the intelligence community, or communities, are more and more under public and media scrutiny as well. The publicly shared intelligence opens a new dimension for researchers, one that is highly likely to expand in the coming years.

The published intelligence and deterrence by exposure were not the only methods the West were using to prevent the war. Sanctions, threat of new more severe sanctions, and traditional diplomacy were some of the other ones. These, however, merit their own separate study.

Amidst the heightened tensions, there was an additional woe facing the governments. The past five or so years had seen the rise of a phenomenon, a contemporary challenge for information and science that

had been labelled the era of post-truth. The governments, in this case especially the active Biden administration, faced a public that might be likely to disparage facts and follow arguments based on beliefs and emotions.<sup>7</sup> Declassified intelligence released by the government would have to first break cognitive resistance, emotions that make people not believe what the officials are saying, and only then convince that the depicted threat is real.

Second Secretary of Canada's High Commission to the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, Molly Graham has summarized that "More impressive than the abundance of open-source information during this most recent war in Europe was the rapid declassification of intelligence. These developments suggest society has entered a new era of transparent warfare."<sup>8</sup>

In a new era of information warfare, deterrence by exposure could form a part of 21<sup>st</sup> century deterrence. But what kind of limitations will it face, and can it really overcome the obstacles of post-truth era and authoritarian government?

## Opposites Repellent – Deterrence by Exposure as a Theoretical Framework

Deterrence is an age-old theoretical guessing game: how much is enough to deter the opponent from acting or reacting, but not too much to cause an unwanted reaction – to become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Deterrence can be described as "the practice of discouraging or restraining someone — in world politics, usually a nation-state—from taking unwanted actions, such as an armed attack".<sup>9</sup> It is distinctively a preventive measure, opposite to using force.

The Cold War saw the emergence of deterrence theory. In those times, deterrence

was concentrated on nuclear arms, first strike and retaliation capabilities, and the mutually assured destruction. However, the changes in international security environment have also affected the concept of deterrence. Situational understanding is of high importance, starting from the actors involved to the regional or even global strategic state of affairs. Intelligence is a major factor of successful deterrence. Deterrence theory itself already carries an intelligence problem: one needs to know the opponents' capabilities as well as assess correctly their will to use them. Deterrence also works differently in a non-crisis waiting game compared to an ongoing crisis, when actions are likely to have altered motivations. The nuclear deterrence involved mainly the great powers and a few other medium powers, but deterrence theory has been applied elsewhere also. In case of Finland, the publicly announced military deterrent is that the probable military aggressor's losses would be higher than the gains. By nature, deterrence involves a threat of some kind to keep an actor from doing something or to keep it continuing the previously chosen path that suits both parties. Nuclear arms, tactical and strategic, have remained at the centre of worldwide deterrence even after the Cold War ended and at the same time deterrence theory has remained alive in international relations.

Deterrence is a complex fabric of variables, whose motivations and interaction between each other are nearly impossible to predict. Deterrence also brews fears in the adversary. Fear, that often turn out to be stronger motivators than opportunism. Deterrence also runs a risk of misunderstandings and inconsistency if it is not properly calculated and based on clear strategic thinking. The theory also requires readiness for compromises and concessions, as well as the often-quoted possibility for an exit or way out for the

adversary. An enemy trapped in a corner is unlikely to behave rationally even to seemingly logical deterrence. In addition, an adversary intent on its actions or one perceiving an existential threat is nearly impossible to deter.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of West deterring Russia from attacking Ukraine, two theoretical perspectives are present. First, this is a case of so-called *extended deterrence*. Especially the US is using deterrence to discourage a Russian attack on a third party, not itself or its own territory. This makes applying successful deterrence already more difficult, as an aggressor can easily understand a nation's willingness to defend itself, but strength of an alliance or partnership is much harder to assess. Second, the build-up to the Russian attack required an *immediate deterrence* as opposed to a long-term *general deterrence*. The need for bolstered deterrence, aggressive and urgent, poses many risks that are much easier to manage in a long-term deterrence effort. In a crisis, the aggressor might see fewer, if any, options left but offensive actions, and deterring it from acting might have become nearly impossible.<sup>11</sup>

An essential part of deterrence is its credibility. Without credibility the deterrence loses its footing, and the threatened aggressor will ignore the threats and continue on its chosen course of action. In crime prevention the same theory has two parts, getting caught and facing a punishment.<sup>12</sup> The shared intelligence would make sure that Russia would be "caught committing an act of war, a crime", but did it really believe in the surety and severity of a punishment?

Professor of public international law Alfred P Rubin (1931–2014) wrote about humanitarian intervention's moral and philosophical issues some twenty years before the war in Ukraine. He concluded that in cases of genocide and other similar horrors,

like in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, the best or even only cure is not a third-party intervention, "but deterrence by exposure and embarrassment". He elaborated that it is not necessarily the perfect solution, but "it is better than having one's own children dying in a struggle they do not understand, and becoming the despised "colonial" masters of a people bent on mutual destruction."<sup>13</sup>

The hypothesis for this article is that the Western states decided to share their precious, but probably not the most precious, intelligence publicly primarily in order to deter Russian leadership's from attacking Ukraine. Therefore, deterrence by exposure is the chosen theoretical framework. The exposure of Russian troop movements and assessments about the decision for use of military force, would, according to the theory, reveal their intentions and make deniability so difficult that president Putin and his administration would change their course of action, and not attack Ukraine. Continuous warnings from Western leadership to Putin to stop the plans or face consequences support this approach.

By studying the events and shared intelligence and statements in the months prior to the attack, it is possible to assess the likelihood of this approach. The outcome known now in hindsight gives also an opportunity to discuss what failed if deterrence by exposure was the theoretical framework for Western course of action.

## Collision Course – The Publicly Shared Intelligence on Russian Activities

The public intelligence sharing on Russian preparations for a war against Ukraine started with the *Washington Post* article<sup>14</sup> on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. The newspaper quoted a US intelligence document it had obtained in

its report on “50 battlefield tactical groups” and other forces, including tanks and artillery in four locations near Ukrainian border. According to the article the U S assessment of Russia’s actions was based on satellite images. The same details, the article revealed, were the backbone of U S Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s December 2<sup>nd</sup> statements<sup>15</sup> on Russian plans of aggression towards Ukraine and his warnings of severe consequences should Russia go ahead with the invasion. The article also quoted intelligence on tactical measures for higher readiness for Russian forces. “The Russian troops worked out the issues of creating strike groups near the borders of our state, mobilization measures, logistical support of groups, [and] transfer of significant military contingents, including by air,” a U S official was quoted saying. The article also quoted the official saying, “Russian influence proxies and media outlets have started to increase content denigrating Ukraine and NATO, in part to pin the blame for a potential Russian military escalation on Ukraine.” The intelligence shared was therefore not only military data but also a more comprehensive view and analysis on Russian preparations for the coming attack.

The *Washington Post* article was widely quoted around Western media. For example, BBC and *The Guardian*<sup>16</sup> in the UK, *Le Figaro* in France,<sup>17</sup> and *Helsingin Sanomat*<sup>18</sup> in Finland published articles on Russian activities quoting the *Washington Post* article as a source or reporting similar information. However, not all articles were as thorough or covering all the aspects as widely as the *Washington Post* article. To add, other *Washington Post* articles<sup>19</sup> frequently referred to the information shared by intelligence quoted in the December 2<sup>nd</sup> article. The focus was on Russian likely plans

to attack and the widely quoted figure of the 175,000 strong invasion force.

*Washington Post* continued reporting on the theme in the following weeks by going deeper into details about the troops in the vicinity of the Ukrainian border and the Russian garrisons in the area. Detailed analysis on movements of material and troops in and outside of the garrisons was a mixed-source work, combining released official intelligence as well as open-source, like *Jane’s*, satellite imagery and assessments.<sup>20</sup>

The media in different countries followed closely the troops gathering through the months prior to the attack. However, many of the articles were based on other sources than the released intelligence from Western intelligence services. For example, *the Guardian* and *Washington Post* published articles on joint Russia-Belarus military exercises mid-January<sup>21</sup> and a visual guide to troop deployments in mid-February.<sup>22</sup> There were, nevertheless, mentions of official intelligence assessments of the troop build-up.<sup>23</sup> Intelligence information on a possible Russian false-flag operation to justify Ukraine invasion surfaced around mid-January as well.<sup>24</sup>

Later in January, when covering European views on the ever-more-likely war, UK prime minister Boris Johnson was quoted as saying that “he had seen clear intelligence of 60 Russian battlegroups on the border”, making a case for a likely swift attack to take out the Kyiv Government. In the same context, French officials were said to be optimistic about indications of Russian preparedness to de-escalate, but without certainties. It was loosely left for the reader to decide whether the French optimism was based on their own intelligence assessments or something else.<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy, that late in March 2022 General Eric Vidaud lost his position as the head of French military intelligence,

reportedly for failed predictions and "inadequate briefings" regarding Ukraine, but also for some previous failings like the AUKUS pact that surprised the French.<sup>26</sup> He had started in his job only seven months earlier. The chief of French armed forces General Thierry Burkhard had stated soon after the attack that his intelligence community was not in accordance with the U S and British services that eventually assessed the situation correctly. According to Burkhard, the French services assessed the costs of an invasion to be too high and therefore Russia would still seek other options.<sup>27</sup>

Also, in the very last days of January, *the Guardian* published an article on Kyiv's sentiments about "Western alarmism". President Zelenskiy's calmness was based on having seen similar tensions with Russia for the past eight years. He was also afraid that signs of Ukrainian mobilization would have bad effects on the country's economy.<sup>28</sup> Some Ukrainians also believed this was all sabre-rattling between the U S and Russia, and the cost of invasion, waging war against their Slavic brothers, would be too high for Russia to execute.<sup>29</sup> The British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and British intelligence officials were quoted on information that Russian military advance operations had already started in Ukraine and that in two to three weeks Russia would have an invasion force of more than 150,000 strong on Ukrainian border. Interestingly, the official assessment was backed up in the article with references to independent satellite imagery and open-source material.<sup>30</sup> This seemingly strengthens the credibility of Western officials, somewhat tarnished in earlier cases like the Iraqi WMDs and war in 2002–2003.

Western leaders' tone changed coming into February. The increasingly dire messages were backed publicly by intelligence:

I will say that the way that he has built up his forces and put them in place, along with the other indicators that we have collected through intelligence, makes it clear to us that there is a very distinct possibility that Russia will choose to act militarily, and there is reason to believe that that could happen on a reasonably swift timeframe.

Jake Sullivan, U S National Security Adviser<sup>31</sup>

Sullivan's warnings were widely reported. His announcement was reportedly backed by new intelligence concluding that there was over 130,000 Russian troops and major weaponry surrounding Ukraine on three sides, ready for an attack.<sup>32</sup> However, *Washington Post* reported that:

Sullivan declined to discuss specific intelligence assessments, but he said that 'the intelligence community has sufficient confidence that I can stand before you today and say ... there is a distinct possibility that Vladimir Putin would order a military action, an invasion of Ukraine, in this window,' potentially including 'the time period before February 20th.'<sup>33</sup>

The intelligence community, he added, believes that 'everything I have just said is well-grounded, in both what they are seeing on the ground and what they are picking up through all of their various sources.'<sup>34</sup>

Reminded of faulty intelligence that preceded the U S invasion of Iraq, Sullivan said there was a 'fundamental distinction' between the two situations. 'In Iraq, intelligence was used and deployed... to start a war,' he said. 'We are trying to stop a war.'<sup>35</sup>

The head of Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS, *Etterretningstjenesten*), Vice-Admiral Nils Andreas Stensønes, confirmed the information of 150,000 Russian troops around Ukrainian borders, adding that the decision to attack was president Putin's, and his alone.

All that is needed for an attack was already in place, waiting for the final decision and go-ahead from President Putin. An article in *the Guardian* mentions other western intelligence services largely agreeing with the assessment, without directly sourcing the information.<sup>36</sup> Another article in the same media shared that “[W]estern intelligence agencies believe that the most likely goal of a Russian offensive would be to surround Kyiv and force regime change.”<sup>37</sup> The *Guardian* then had its own analyst describing the scenario further.<sup>38</sup> The profound intelligence cooperation between the Five Eyes countries (US, UK, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia) meant that they were also sharing more intelligence between each other than on other occasions, which lead to scepticism at the beginning. Especially the U S made further efforts to convince its other partners of their information and assessments.<sup>39</sup>

Around the same time, Russia was telling the world it was withdrawing its troops after an exercise near Ukrainian borders. Although no Western intelligence was directly quoted, NATO’s secretary general Jens Stoltenberg and other Western officials confirmed that “[W]e have not seen any sign of de-escalation on the ground” and “[W]e see no sign of Russian de-escalation. [W]e see the opposite.”, respectively. The comments on the matter also included a rare public statement confirming the same from Jim Hockehull, the chief of UK defence intelligence.<sup>40</sup> President Biden addressed the nation along the same lines, being very cautiously optimistic if it were true that Russian troops were indeed withdrawing.<sup>41</sup>

The UK Ministry of Defence took a new step in its information warfare by starting to publish abridged intelligence updates on its Twitter account. This started in mid-February. This was a notable change in British intelligence culture. The British have always

been more cautious about their intelligence community, especially compared to the Americans, even though academically British intelligence and its services have been studied relatively thoroughly.<sup>42</sup> On top of trying to stop President Putin from launching his troops on Ukraine, the tweets were used to counter Russian narratives and hopefully reach even normal Russians, at least before the Russian officials restricted access to foreign media online.

A week before the start of the war, following a suspected Russian false-flag operation shelling a kindergarten, UK Foreign Minister Liz Truss reportedly said in another indication of, to quote ex-CIA employee John Sipher, “more savvy” use of Western intelligence that

The west needs to wise up, and work together to discredit Russian arguments in public. We should use our intelligence strategically to challenge their narrative – as we did last month, exposing the Kremlin’s plan to install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv and exposing their military buildup on the border.<sup>43</sup>

Intelligence on the possibility of a false-flag operation had been made public approximately a week earlier by the White House. In the same article, *Washington Post* quoted Western officials, relying on intelligence, that Russia was in the final states of its war preparations and is just trying to create a reason to justify going to war.<sup>44</sup>

President Biden’s statement on 18<sup>th</sup> of February, also a week before the Russian attack, was clear-cut. He said he had believable intelligence indicating that president Putin had made his decision to attack. However, he added that the war could still be “averted with further diplomacy”.<sup>45</sup>

We’re calling out Russia’s plans loudly, repeatedly, not because we want a conflict,

but because we're doing everything in our power to remove any reason that Russia may give to justify invading Ukraine and prevent them from moving.

## The Wolf I Feed – The Public Fight with Secrets

*Washington Post* published two articles in February discussing Biden administration's strategy of deterrence against Russia and the public use of intelligence. The first article begun with an assessment highlighting the use of intelligence in public:

Since U S intelligence detected serious Russian planning for an invasion in October, the Biden administration has waged a campaign of deterrence in what the Russians sometimes call the 'information space'. To mobilize allies, U S officials have shared sensitive intelligence about Russia's moves; when they've detected Russian plots, they've disclosed them. These aggressive tactics have checked Russia's usual advantages of surprise and stealth.<sup>46</sup>

The same article also pointed to U S intelligence worries already earlier than December, in August 2021, about unusual Russian activities. For example, activation of the reserves.<sup>47</sup> The second article, about a week later, went along the same lines as the first one highlighting the unprecedented use of intelligence:

Few things in geopolitical crises are more sensitive than intelligence. And yet, from the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, the Biden administration has been extraordinarily vocal about U S knowledge of Russian movements, tactics and planning. One analyst dubs it 'Biden's megaphone strategy'. Others say you need to go back years to find a similar crisis where a U S administration has shared this much information with this level of specificity this quickly.<sup>48</sup>

The former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine (2003–2006), John E. Herbst, supported this point of view by saying that “[T]his is unprecedented, even going back to before my professional life. Maybe you could compare it to the [1962] Cuban missile crisis ... [or] the build up to war in Iraq.” The writer pondered why officials are usually very careful about releasing intelligence bringing up reasons like safeguarding the sources. He also went deeper into the philosophical side of intelligence by writing that “[I]ntelligence gathering and processing is more art than science, a tapestry of secrets held together by analytical assumptions. Intelligence can be – and often is – spun, and can be – and often is – wrong.” Last observation was supported by the example of the Iraqi WMDs. In bold letters, the writer noted that “[T]hat doesn't mean U.S. assessments are off now – or that the Russian bear won't claw its way into Ukraine. In fact, so far, the sense of Herbst and others is that the administration has gotten this right.”<sup>49</sup>

*The Guardian* as well published an article on the public use of intelligence, although a bit later in mid-February.<sup>50</sup> *The Guardian* assessed that Western officials were attempting to deny president Putin the element of surprise if not completely managing to turn his head around. The article gathered that “[T]here have been regular briefings in Washington and London – sometimes from national security officials who do not often talk to the press – going into detail about potential Russian military tactics, regime change plots, and ‘false flag’ operations Moscow is allegedly planning to provide a pretext for invasion.” The article also quoted Sipher who said that the West is getting better, and “more savvy on using intelligence in an actionable way”. In Sipher's opinion, the West had always been



behind Russia in information warfare and according to him:

...this information isn't meant for Americans or British citizens. It's meant for one consumer: Vladimir Putin, Sipher said. "He's the one who knows whether it's true or not. So, if we put out intelligence that the Russians thought was secret, and Putin knows it's true, he's got to decide how it has consequences for what he was trying to do, and how it's affecting his strategy."

President Biden's statement on 18<sup>th</sup> of February supports the earlier assessment and hypothesis that making intelligence on Russian plans public was intended to change president Putin's mind about starting the war. Interestingly, in the following days, there was some discord between the U S and its European allies. Some European allies were quoted as being frustrated that U S didn't share the intelligence it had, the intelligence that made them so certain that president Biden would give his February 18<sup>th</sup> statement.<sup>51</sup>

*Washington Post* published an article on the "intelligence war" just one day before the attack. It commended Biden administration's fight back against Russian with "aggressive use of intelligence", but warned of Russia's history of mind games and the use of intelligence before. The article also commended the U S intelligence community's, only CIA specifically mentioned, performance so far in the crisis. Examples were made of penetration into Russian military planning, the discovered false-flag preparations, and the plans for "targeted killings and kidnappings of Ukrainian leaders". This was believed to have effect on president Putin when seeing his state secrets out in the open, especially in Western media.<sup>52</sup>

For weeks, Russian officials and commentators had strongly denied that the coun-

try was planning an attack on neighbouring Ukraine. At points, they ridiculed such claims from the United States and its allies as 'hysteria' and 'fairy tales.' That turned out not to be true.<sup>53</sup>

Biden was seen to have won the intelligence war, even though the start of the real war was eventually a loss for most of the world. The calculated risk of making intelligence public and sharing it with media was seen as risk that would pay off. The intelligence community would strengthen its position, especially in the public eye. In addition, reality of Russian claims and denials were seen, in hindsight, clearer than ever. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova's earlier jokes on the accuracy of Western intelligence and the start of the Russian attack on 16<sup>th</sup> of February were eventually erased from the list of the funny incidents and seen in the right perspective.<sup>54</sup> As it is with intelligence, sometimes the community's pleasure in being right is bittersweet.

Senior advisor Eric S Edelman, the former US ambassador to Finland and Turkey and undersecretary of defense for policy, scrutinized Biden administration's "deterrence by disclosure" strategy just days before Russia's attack. He described it as a chosen and safest strategy for when one is "playing with a weak hand". Edelman saw the shared information on troop movements alerting Americans and Europeans to an incoming political and military crisis. The disclosures on plots and provocations had, according to Edelman, disrupted Russia's operational planning. This same method had been used previously by the US administration against violent extremist plots in counterterrorism framework. As a consequence, Russian officials, especially President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov were seen denying

publicly any plans to invade. This is likely to have bought more time for diplomacy, albeit eventually for no successful outcome. At the same time Ukraine had more time to enhance its defences. Releasing intelligence has its risks. These include inadvertently exposing one's sources and ways of securing the information. Decisionmakers are likely to see this as an acceptable price to pay, if war is avoided. Long-term effects, on the other hand, are difficult to foresee.<sup>55</sup>

On the first anniversary of the war, *Politico* published a comprehensive retrospective on the U S administration's preparations for the war. The officials, like Director National Intelligence Avril Haines, recall seeing the Russian troop build-up near Ukraine having unusual measures already in Spring 2021, and the worries grew as the year went on. According to Blinken, the information gathered by US intelligence was not only about the troops, but also about Russian leadership's intentions on using them for an invasion. The decision to declassify intelligence was made by President Biden. It was a strategy supported by the DNI Haines, the Chief of CIA Bill Burns and National Security Advisor Sullivan, among others. According to Sullivan the declassification was done with cooperation by the intelligence community that helped by telling what information could be declassified and released. General Paul Nakasone, commander of United States Cyber Command and the director of the National Security Agency, concludes that "[T]his is the nation's intelligence. This isn't an agency or the intelligence community's or anyone else's intelligence. When it benefits our national security, why do we not do that?". The officials knew they were making a bold move, putting the U S credibility online. But they saw that not using the opportunity to challenge Russia in information space, and especially if it was lost to Russian

narratives, would be even more detrimental. Deterring President Putin from launching his attack is not mentioned as a distinct objective for the release of intelligence, or at least it is not mentioned in the published quotes in the *Politico* article.<sup>56</sup>

When analysing the competition to control the information space, especially in hindsight, it is important not to over-emphasise or exaggerate the intentions, or worse yet, fall in the trap of retrospective illusion of necessity<sup>57</sup> that might be affecting assessments or memories of decision making. Successes or failures of earlier decisions and policies can affect recollections of those involved in the processes. Active control of the information space with declassified intelligence also served a prebunking objective. Early warnings of false flag operations are a good example of how an actor can prepare the public to encounter, recognise, and resist the coming disinformation. Just like vaccination, the people are inoculated to have better defence against something, in this case disinformation.<sup>58</sup>

## Errors in the Signals – Conclusions

Intelligence and its interaction with the public eye are becoming a more mundane occurrence than could have ever been imagined. Intelligence is not only the object of growing amount of public activity, but also more and more a subject in the same dimension. The public use of intelligence data and assessments, as well as statements during the study timeline by official support the hypothesis of attempted deterrence by exposure. The primary purpose of published classified intelligence was to deny Russian control of the information space or even win it over from the beginning of the escalation of the crisis. A secondary goal, the strategically important

thing to attempt was to deter President Putin from attacking Ukraine. The frequency, the nature, and the amount of intelligence all support this assessment and the order of these objectives.

Thinking back to Germany in the 1930s and Argentina in the 1980s, there is always the possibility of misread or wrong signals, like the appeasement policy or lack of proper military capabilities.<sup>59</sup> In hindsight this should not have been the case with Russia and the deterrence it faced, even though the relatively mild Western response to the invasion of Crimea in 2014 is likely to have encouraged President Putin to proceed with his plans in 2022. Russia had its pieces of Clausewitzian strategic puzzle in place when starting the war: political aims to be achieved, and how to conduct the war.<sup>60</sup> Historians will undoubtedly tell the world in detail one day how this was not enough for a successful war.

The failure of the released intelligence, the exposure, to work as a deterrence is likely to have, at least in part, been due to one well-known and academically studied<sup>61</sup> bias: mirror-imaging. In many cases humans, analysts and decisionmakers, assume the opponent to think and act in the same way, and with the same rationale as themselves. To some extent, deterrence and, in contemporary world, much-used (economic) sanctions share the same philosophies, and pitfalls. Mirror-imaging is a considerable pitfall to avoid.

In this context, it is also interesting to think what kind of effects correct or incorrect published intelligence has if a decision has been made to attack or not to attack. If the actor is not attacking and incorrect intelligence is shared publicly, the actor needs to think if there is a need to convince anyone otherwise. An example of this is Saddam Hussein's attempts to convince the world

that there were no WMDs in Iraq anymore. The published intelligence could be merely a reputation issue, which for some countries doesn't seem to matter that much, or it can be countered with disinformation campaigns. However, if the intelligence is correct, the actor needs to revise any existing plans and especially its operational security (OPSEC). This, depending on the strategic culture of the actor, could also pave the way for further negotiations. But then there are the cases when the actor has decided to attack. If the shared intelligence is incorrect the soon-to-be aggressor has reinforced confidence in itself and continued element of surprise. The initiative rests mostly, if not solely, on the aggressor. However, if the published intelligence is correct, it could enforce changes to schedule or even last-minute alterations to formation. This also means deficiencies in OPSEC and the need to fix them as soon as possible.

Russians, and especially President Putin knew the released intelligence to be correct. Hopefully the historians will one day have a chance to study if it had any of the effects theorized above. As said before, the declassified intelligence is likely to have played only a small part in the developments and attempts to stop the war.

As a likely lesson-identified, the Strategic Concept released at the June 2022 Madrid NATO summit called for significant strengthening of the Alliance's deterrence. The changes in the principles of deterrence were recognized and understood to need readjustments from the alliance.<sup>62</sup>

A year after the war started, the US is contemplating, publicly, about releasing intelligence on Chinese arms transfers to Russia, again to deter China from continuing to reinforce its support to Russia.<sup>63</sup> This can be interpreted to support the conclusion, that regardless of the inability to stop a war, re-

leased and publicly shared intelligence has some desired effects so much so that it is a deterrence the West is trusting to use again. It might not completely deter from acting in a certain way, but it might postpone the actions or make one alter the initially chosen course of action. Both of these might prove precious, even paramount in hindsight.

The correct assessment of Russian plans has certainly polished the shield of Western intelligence community that took a huge gamble in sharing its information and assessments. Russia did not manage to surprise the West, when previous "failings" regarding for example Iraq and Afghanistan were still haunting the public image of intelligence services. For Ukraine, the alarms meant economic challenges even before the attack, as investors were getting worried and

withdrawing from its markets. In hindsight, had there not been an invasion, this would have served Russia's objectives.<sup>64</sup>

If the plan to prevent the attack, deterrence by exposure, had worked, the intelligence assessments of the attack would have looked wrong and alarmist in the public eye, but the higher purpose would have been fulfilled. Unfortunately, at least from a humanitarian perspective, as inviting as it sounds, the theory and professor Rubin's vision remains to be proven effective. In a new era of warfare and war in Europe, there is also need to redefine deterrence, and what part intelligence will play in it.

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