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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM'S
NATIONAL SECURITY SUBCOMMITTEE

Hearing on “Defending U.S. Allies and Interests Against Russian Aggression in Eastern Europe”

BY

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Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about Russia's continuing aggression against Ukraine.

We are in a critical period. Russia could invade Ukraine at any time with no additional warning. While the door to diplomacy is not closed and every effort must continue to be made to find a diplomatic path to avert crisis, there remains a significant risk that Russia will launch a military incursion into Ukraine.

President Putin seeks to keep Ukraine in Russia's orbit. Not only has this been a longstanding Russian objective, but for Putin it's personal. He has repeatedly tried and failed over the course of his 22 years in power to bring Ukraine back into the Russian fold. He apparently calculates that now is the time, through the threat of use of force, to halt Ukraine's westward and democratic trajectory. And while this crisis is about Ukraine, it is also about more than Ukraine. Putin is seeking to reverse the consequences of the Soviet collapse, rewrite the rules of the European security order, and reinstate spheres of influence. Putin may be thinking about his legacy and likely sees himself as the last Russian leader willing to take such significant risk to reassert Russia's preeminence in what he insists is Russia's privileged sphere and in world affairs.

Putin has options. If he remains committed to advancing his maximalist objectives—namely autonomy for regions in Ukraine's east that would give Russia a veto over Ukraine's foreign policy and to keep Ukraine out of NATO—then he likely views a military incursion as necessary to accomplish these aims. The question now is whether there is any outcome short of these maximalist objectives that Putin could walk away with, and that would be acceptable to Ukraine. This is a crisis of Putin's making and he can still pursue a peaceful path should he so choose.

The Biden administration has taken several prudent steps to influence how Putin weighs his options. Washington has raised the alarm bells early and declassified information to rob the Kremlin of the element of surprise and ability to control the global narrative. The administration has fostered cohesion with our NATO allies and partners, reinforced Ukraine, clearly outlined the costs Putin would face for escalation, and identified a list of mutually beneficial arms control and risk reduction measures to engage on. Along with other NATO member states, the administration has also wisely sent U.S. troops to strengthen NATO's eastern flank to ensure that if there is conflict, it remains contained to Ukraine. This decision was a solid signal of America's commitment to NATO and to President Putin that the United States is serious about increasing U.S. force posture in Europe if he invades.

We should be clear that this is the riskiest endeavor Putin has pursued in his 22 years in power. There is ample room for Putin to miscalculate—as highly personalist authoritarian leaders are prone to doing—including in ways that could destabilize the Putin regime domestically. The United States and its allies must respond strongly and decisively to any escalation to ensure that the external pressure Putin faces is punishing. There is a risk that the Kremlin would look to retaliate for costly Western sanctions, so Washington must be prepared for and seek to prevent an escalating spiral of responses.

Regardless of what happens in Ukraine, the United States needs to forge a new approach to Russia. Russia's military buildup in Ukraine was an unmistakable signal that the Kremlin has no interest in having the stable and predictable relationship that Washington sought to establish. If Russia invades and is successful in its objectives, it will harden the dividing line between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. The Kremlin will have advanced its vision of the world where might makes right, and strong states can change borders through force. The effects of Russian actions will radiate far beyond Ukraine. Dealing with and preventing future damage will require long term, persistent pressure to disrupt and constrain Russia's capacity to pursue its destabilizing actions. It will require the United States and its European allies to relearn some of the lessons from the Cold War, and update and apply those lessons to the modern era. Congress plays an important role in this new approach to Russia: several dimensions of U.S. Russia policy are currently underutilized, and Congress could do more, for example, in the anti-corruption domain and in support of Russian civil society. Congress must also help communicate to Americans that there will likely be costs to confronting a Russia that judges that the peaceful rules no longer apply.

Even if Russia does not immediately invade, the United States cannot simply return to its previous business of focusing predominately on China. Washington and its allies are dealing with a more brazen Russia—one that uses or threatens military force to pursue objectives that are at odds with America’s interests and values. Moreover, Russia will maintain not just the intent but also the capacity to challenge U.S. national security interests for decades to come. Russia will remain a persistent power—a good enough power—and that means that the United States cannot afford to look past Russia. China remains the most significant long-term challenge the United States faces, but it is not the only challenge. Instead, Washington must make strategic and budgetary choices that reflect this reality.

