

Putting Lipstick on Victoria Nuland: Narrative Cosmetics on a Self-Inflicted European Crisis

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This essay argues that the West's Ukraine policy, personified in Victoria Nuland's 2013–2014 activism and its aftermath, is less a tragic surprise than a case study in how elites kick a dangerously unstable system and then repaint the wreckage. Nuland's role in backing the Maidan uprising, openly discussing the composition of a post-Yanukovich government, and dismissing Brussels with "f*** the EU" revealed a mindset: Ukraine would be treated as a forward project of U.S. strategy, not a fragile ridge between security architectures. A decade later, Europe faces war on its soil, energy shock, industrial erosion, and generals speaking casually about "losing our children" and a possible 2030 confrontation with Russia. Rather than own the earlier misjudgments, much of the establishment has applied narrative cosmetics: framing the chain of events as an unavoidable clash with evil, demanding a "war economy," and recoding policy failure as historic necessity. "Putting lipstick on Victoria Nuland" names this process: the attempt to beautify and depersonalize a set of choices that amplified risk in a complex dynamical system. The goal is not to demonize a single official, but to strip the lipstick off a whole style of geopolitics before it leads Europe into its next disaster.

Keywords: Victoria Nuland, Ukraine crisis, Europe, Russia, NATO, Maidan, complex systems, strategic miscalculation, war economy, 2030 war narrative, energy security, deindustrialization, logostics, q to tau.

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1. Introduction – Lipstick, Pigs, and Policy Amnesia

It is tempting to treat the last decade of European crisis as a sequence of unfortunate surprises: an unexpected uprising in Kyiv, an unforeseeable Russian annexation, an unimaginable full-scale invasion, and now, allegedly, an unavoidable looming war by 2030. In this official story, events cascade from the outside in. History happens to Europe; Europe endures history. What disappears in that telling are the deliberate choices made on a highly unstable fault line, the people who embodied those choices, and the subsequent effort to repaint all of it as tragic inevitability rather than human agency.

The phrase “putting lipstick on a pig” captures this double movement. The pig is the underlying policy trajectory: using Ukraine as a forward operating project in a complex security system without redesigning the surrounding architecture, then professing shock when the system breaks. The lipstick is the retrospective narrative work: recoding risky activism as pure democracy support, calling energy dependence “resilience,” and now dressing a self-inflicted basin of confrontation as a quasi-prophetic “2030 war” with Russia. The public is expected to see only the lipstick and to forget the underlying animal.

Victoria Nuland is not the only author of this story, but she is a useful focal point. Her “f*** the EU” moment in 2014 and the later European talk of being “ready to lose our children” in a future clash with Russia bookend a single elite worldview. On one end, a cavalier willingness to manipulate the political composition of a state on Russia’s border while dismissing European caution. On the other, the readiness to normalize mass sacrifice within Europe itself, presented as the price of resisting the very danger that earlier decisions helped amplify. Between those two poles lies a decade of complex-system mismanagement, wrapped in moral language and sold back to the same populations who will be asked to pay the bill.

This introduction sets the frame. The argument is not that one official secretly plotted to destroy Europe, nor that Russia bears no responsibility for its own choices. Rather, it is that a particular style of Western statecraft—confident, interventionist, and incurious about nonlinear dynamics—pushed a high-gain system past its stability margins, and now seeks absolution by rebranding the resulting basin of confrontation as fate. To see that clearly, we must keep both the pig and the lipstick in view at the same time.

1.1 From “f* the EU” to “lose our children”**

The leaked phone call in which Victoria Nuland dismissed Brussels with “f*** the EU” has often been treated as a diplomatic gaffe, a rude aside in an otherwise legitimate democracy-support operation. In reality, that one phrase exposed a hierarchy of priorities. The European Union was not a co-equal partner with independent security interests; it was a frustrating constraint on a US-driven project to reshape Ukraine’s political trajectory quickly and decisively. The call went

beyond vulgarity. It revealed that the composition of the next Ukrainian government was being discussed as if it were a staffing problem in a Washington-managed transition, with local actors slotted into pre-imagined roles.

Fast forward a decade, and we hear senior European military leaders warning that citizens must be prepared “to lose their children” and to “suffer economically” as part of an impending shock, perhaps a confrontation with Russia by 2030. The continuity between these two moments is striking. In 2014, an American official casually subordinated European caution to a more aggressive script, on the assumption that Europe would absorb whatever turbulence followed. In the mid-2020s, European elites speak as though the only honorable response to the resulting turbulence is stoic acceptance of sacrifice. The underlying pattern is the same: decisions are made at altitude; ordinary Europeans are invited to provide bodies, savings, and psychological endurance.

Reading those quotes together highlights the central move this essay wants to resist. The system was not gently drifting toward catastrophe; it was pushed, repeatedly, at precisely its most sensitive points. When the early pushers later appear in different guises, urging resolve and martyrdom, it is not enough to say “that was then, this is now.” A serious analysis must connect the front-end willingness to treat Ukraine as an instrument with the back-end willingness to treat European populations as an expendable reservoir for a confrontation that might have been structured very differently.

1.2 Why personifying a system in Nuland clarifies, not oversimplifies

There is always a risk, in naming a single person, of turning structural critique into personal blame. Yet refusing to name anyone can be just as misleading. Victoria Nuland is analytically useful not because she single-handedly designed Western policy, but because she concentrates its assumptions in a form that can be inspected. Her career sits at the intersection of State Department orthodoxy, NATO expansion logic, and the post–Cold War belief that borders near Russia are legitimate venues for Western regime engineering. She is both an individual and a synecdoche.

Personifying the system in Nuland accomplishes several things. First, it restores agency. Abstract talk of “the West” or “the international community” often obscures the fact that identifiable officials made specific calls at key branching points. Second, her recorded words strip away later rhetorical varnish. When someone is heard in real time choosing leaders for a foreign government, or curtly dismissing allied institutions, it becomes harder to pretend that Western involvement was limited to moral encouragement and technical advice. The distance between internal reality and public narrative is measurable.

Third, treating Nuland as a focal node reminds us that systems are enacted through human beings with temperaments, loyalties, and blind spots. Complex dynamics do not absolve those actors; they simply constrain the precision with which outcomes can be predicted. The question is not whether Nuland—or any single official—meant to destroy Europe. The question is whether the style of thinking she exemplifies is structurally prone to underestimating risk in chaotic environments, and whether later efforts to recode outcomes as inevitable depend on forgetting what that style looked like when it felt triumphant.

To avoid oversimplification, the analysis will repeatedly widen back out: to European institutions that acquiesced, to Russian choices that escalated, and to wider economic and energy systems that translated political nudges into material consequences. But keeping Nuland in the frame as a recurring character prevents the story from dissolving into a blur of anonymous forces. She is not the whole system; she is the readable face of one of its key attractors.

1.3 Complex systems, unstable ridges, and responsibility without omniscience

The defense of the last decade's policy is already rehearsed: the system is complex, the actors are many, and no one could have foreseen the precise path from Maidan to full-scale war to a possible 2030 confrontation. That much is true. The interactions among Ukrainian domestic politics, Russian strategic culture, EU economic structures, NATO doctrines, and US domestic cycles form a high-dimensional, nonlinear system. Small interventions can have large effects; trajectories can bifurcate unexpectedly. No human being, no matter how well informed, can write down the full set of equations, let alone solve them.

Complexity, however, is not the same as inscrutability. Even without a closed-form model, it is possible to identify unstable ridges in state space—configurations where known great-power red lines, historical grievances, and institutional weaknesses coincide. Ukraine in 2013–2014 was such a ridge. It sat at the interface between two incompatible security architectures. Its economy and society were deeply entangled with both Russia and the European Union. Its political system was fragile and contested. Any substantial external push toward one camp or the other was not a minor perturbation. It was a shove applied at a point of maximum leverage.

Responsibility without omniscience means acknowledging two facts at once. First, no policymaker could have specified, in 2014, that the result would be an invasion in 2022, certain specific sanctions packages, particular energy shocks, and generals in 2025 talking about losing children in a 2030 war. Second, those same policymakers could and should have recognized that they were acting on an unstable ridge where war was one of the plausible branches, not an unthinkable outlier. They did not need to know everything to know that this was a place to tread lightly, redesign structures, and prioritize stability.

The choice instead was to act as if the ridge were solid ground, and then, when the system rolled downhill into a harder basin of confrontation, to speak as though gravity alone were to blame. The language of inevitability—“Russia was always going to do this,” “war by 2030 is coming”—functions as post hoc absolution. A complexity-aware ethic would reject that absolution. It would insist that we track who kicked the system where, even if we cannot compute the full evolution of the state vector. The rest of this essay proceeds on that basis: not claiming prophetic hindsight, but refusing to let complexity be an all-purpose alibi for choices that mattered.

2. Ukraine 2013–2014 as High-Gain Ridge

To understand why the choices of 2013–2014 mattered so much, one has to see Ukraine not as a passive backdrop but as a high-gain node in the European security system. It was not just “another country in transition.” It was a place where two incompatible security logics met: a NATO–EU project built on expansion and integration, and a Russian project built on buffer zones, privileged influence, and historical claims. The line between these architectures did not run only on maps; it ran through Ukrainian industry, energy networks, language communities, and elites.

In such a setting, ordinary political moves can have extraordinary effects. A trade agreement becomes a question of alignment. A street protest becomes a referendum on spheres of influence. A change of government becomes a test of resolve for nuclear-armed powers. This is what it means to call Ukraine, circa 2013–2014, a high-gain ridge: small shifts in policy and rhetoric can tip the system into sharply divergent basins of attraction. That is the context in which Victoria Nuland’s activism, the Maidan uprising, and the leaked phone call must be read.

2.1 A boundary state between two security architectures

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had existed in a suspended state between two orderings of Europe. On one side stood the NATO–EU complex, with its promises of collective defense, market integration, and formalized law. On the other stood the Russian conception of a near abroad in which Moscow reserved the right to shape outcomes, particularly in states with large Russian-speaking populations, shared industrial chains, and deep cultural ties.

Institutionally, this boundary status was visible everywhere. Ukraine cooperated with NATO but was not a member. It pursued association with the European Union but remained deeply integrated into Russian energy systems and markets. Its political parties were divided along vectors that often mapped onto regional and linguistic cleavages. Its security services and oligarchic networks were penetrated by both Western and Russian interests. To imagine this as

a neutral background for Western “democracy promotion” or Russian “fraternal assistance” is to miss the point. The system was already saturated with hard security meaning.

Geographically, Ukraine’s position sharpened the stakes. Control over its territory affects access to the Black Sea, the depth of Russia’s western defensive belt, the viability of European land-based gas routes, and the psychology of states from Poland to the Baltics. Symbolically, Kyiv is loaded with narratives: cradle of Rus, victim of famine, hero of resistance. For Moscow, losing influence there is not simply losing a neighbor; it feels like an amputation. For parts of the West, “saving” Ukraine became proof that history still bends toward their preferred script.

In such a configuration, it is misleading to speak of “internal Ukrainian choice” as if the system around it were neutral. The boundary character of the state meant that every internal move was also read as an external signal. A treaty signature, an election result, a crowd in a square in Kyiv did not stay in Kyiv. They propagated through military doctrines, intelligence assessments, and alliance debates far beyond its borders.

2.2 Maidan as genuine uprising and strategic fault line

The Maidan protests were real. People came into the streets for reasons that had nothing to do with Victoria Nuland, Vladimir Putin, or Brussels. They were angry at corruption, police violence, and a president who seemed prepared to trade away a long-promised association agreement with the European Union in exchange for opaque deals with Moscow. Many Ukrainians wanted a different future, one that looked more like Warsaw or Prague than like a continuation of post-Soviet stagnation. Any honest account must hold on to that agency.

Yet the reality of Maidan as a genuine uprising does not erase its other role: it became a strategic fault line in the boundary state. The square was soon ringed not only by Ukrainian flags but by cameras, diplomats, and covert operators from more than one capital. Every stone thrown, every concession or crackdown, was watched as a proxy signal: would Ukraine fall decisively into one camp or the other. Inside the crowd, the issue might have been dignity and justice. Outside, the issue quickly became whether this uprising could be harnessed to shift the geopolitical balance.

This dual nature made the square an especially dangerous place to play with external influence. To the extent Western actors fed resources, advice, and political cover into the uprising, they were not simply supporting abstract “civil society.” They were intervening at a point where domestic and international fault lines were fused. This does not mean that Moscow’s later military actions were justified; it does mean that the risk envelope was obvious. When a boundary state tips, it tends not to tip quietly.

Maidan should therefore be remembered in both registers at once. It was a cry for a more accountable, less corrupt Ukrainian state. It was also a moment when great-power strategies

were projected onto the bodies in the square. The tragedy of the years that followed is that the second register eventually dominated the first, as geopolitical confrontation devoured the original civic demands.

2.3 The leaked call: “Yats is the guy” and the revealed mindset

Within this charged environment, the leaked phone call between Victoria Nuland and the US ambassador to Ukraine landed like a flare in a dark room. In the recording, they discuss which opposition leaders should be in the next government, how to manage competing egos, and how to use the United Nations to legitimize the preferred configuration. The now-famous insult toward the European Union was not an isolated outburst. It was part of a conversation in which Ukrainian political futures were being arranged in a matter-of-fact tone reminiscent of internal staffing decisions.

The content of the call revealed several things at once. First, it confirmed that Washington saw itself not as a distant supporter of democratic processes but as an active architect of outcomes. Saying “Yats is the guy” about a future prime minister in a boundary state is not a small slip. It is a window into how the situation was framed: a problem to be managed in line with a preexisting script of Western alignment, with local figures assigned to roles that would make that script executable.

Second, the casual “f*** the EU” remark exposed the internal hierarchy of allies. European reservations, driven in part by proximity and awareness of Russian sensitivities, were treated as irritants. The EU was too slow, too cautious, insufficiently willing to take risk on its own doorstep. The impatience conveyed in the call suggests not only bad manners but a deep confidence that Washington knew better how much stress the system could bear.

Third, the very existence of such a candid call signaled a blind spot about the possibility of leakage and blowback. In a high-gain setting, one might expect senior officials to assume that their internal planning could one day become public and to calibrate their words accordingly. That they did not hints at a belief that the narrative could always be controlled after the fact: whatever came out, it could be repainted as ordinary diplomacy in support of democracy. The later effort to treat the call as an embarrassment rather than a revelation fit this pattern.

2.4 What a complexity-aware West should have inferred right then

A complexity-aware approach in 2013–2014 would not have required clairvoyance. It would have required taking seriously three simultaneous facts that were already in plain sight.

First, Ukraine was a boundary state sitting on an unstable ridge. This implied that any move to push it decisively into one security architecture or the other would not be experienced as routine politics by the excluded side. It would be read as a potential strategic defeat and

possible casus belli, even if the initiating actors did not intend it that way. A complexity-aware West would have treated this as a warning to prioritize arrangements that kept Ukraine from being locked into either camp too quickly.

Second, the leaked call proved that Western involvement was not limited to moral support and economic incentives. It showed a hands-on attempt to shape the composition of government in a way that would be legible to Moscow as regime change. Once that was visible, a complexity-aware analyst would have updated their risk estimate. The combination of visible meddling, an embattled Russian leadership, and an already volatile domestic scene in Ukraine should have raised the probability of hard responses, including territorial grabs and long-term conflict.

Third, the European reaction to the call, particularly the muted institutional response, demonstrated that the internal checks on US activism were weak. If Brussels was willing to swallow both the insult and the revealed degree of manipulation without demanding a serious rethinking of strategy, then the system lacked a built-in brake. A complexity-aware West would have inferred that its own governance structure was not well tuned to handle high-gain boundary crises. That should have triggered a redesign of decision-making, not just a tightening of message discipline.

From these premises, a different policy could have flowed. Instead of doubling down on rapid Western alignment for Ukraine, the focus could have shifted to constructing a robust, explicitly neutral security status, backed by enforceable guarantees and economic support, designed to keep the ridge from collapsing into war. Instead of assuming that Russia would ultimately accept the loss of influence as it had tolerated previous NATO expansions, planners could have treated 2014 as a hard limit test and adjusted expectations accordingly.

The fact that this did not happen is not explained away by invoking complexity. It reflects a choice to treat a warning flare as a minor public relations problem and to continue pushing the system in the same direction. The later rhetoric about inevitability, looming 2030 confrontations, and necessary sacrifices rests on that uncorrected choice.

3. Narrative Cosmetics I: Democracy, Freedom, and Selective Vision

Once the system began to wobble, much of the Western political class reached for familiar language: democracy, freedom, European values, the right of peoples to choose their own future. These themes are not empty. Ukrainians did, in large numbers, demand a different relationship to power and corruption. They did take risks for a more open, accountable state. But the way those aspirations were integrated into Western messaging did something more than honor their courage. It turned a highly specific, highly risky regime-change style

intervention into a morality play in which the West appeared as a neutral midwife of freedom and Russia as an atavistic enemy of choice.

This was the first layer of narrative cosmetics. By framing their own role as simply standing with "democracy," Western actors shifted attention away from the mechanics of their involvement: the phone calls, the funding streams, the coaching of opposition figures, the fast-moving constitutional maneuvers. The more the crisis could be told as a story about peoples and principles, the less space there was to ask whether it was wise to act out this story at a place where two nuclear-armed orders collided. The ridge disappeared into the glow of values.

3.1 Framing regime engineering as pure "democratic choice"

The most consistent trope of 2014 was that Ukrainians were "choosing Europe." The association agreement with the EU, the protests in Maidan, and the fall of Yanukovich were all folded into a single narrative arc: a long-suffering people finally turning away from corruption and toward a European future. In that story, Western diplomats, NGOs, and officials like Nuland were simply responding to an authentic democratic impulse, helping to ensure that the people's voice was heard and protected.

What this framing obscured was the degree to which Western policy did not merely amplify an existing choice but structured the menu of choices on offer. When outside actors help pick which opposition leader is "the guy," which coalition is acceptable, and which concessions are non-negotiable, they are not passive observers of democracy. They are engaged in regime engineering: shaping the composition and orientation of a government in line with their own security and economic interests.

The insistence that all of this was nothing but support for "democratic choice" served several purposes. It preemptively delegitimized any critique as being against democracy itself. It relieved Western publics of the burden of thinking about spheres of influence, strategic depth, or escalation dynamics; those were implicitly framed as cynical topics that belonged to others. And it allowed policymakers to claim that they were honoring Ukrainian agency while in practice steering that agency toward a narrow band of acceptable outcomes. The more the word "choice" was repeated, the less the structure of the choice was interrogated.

3.2 Erasing the ridge: how NATO/EU pretended the basin was stable

Alongside the democracy narrative ran an institutional one: the idea that the NATO/EU basin was inherently stable and that bringing Ukraine fully into it would naturally produce security and prosperity. In this view, there was no ridge at all, only a gradual slope from post-Soviet ambiguity to Euro-Atlantic normality. Each association agreement, each partnership program, each training mission was portrayed as a small, rational step in an obvious direction.

This story required a careful forgetting. It required forgetting that NATO expansion had long been identified, by Western and Russian analysts alike, as a potential source of confrontation if pushed too far east. It required forgetting that Ukraine was not Poland in the 1990s, but a state whose identity and economic life were braided tightly with Russia's. It required ignoring the way in which each incremental move was interpreted in Moscow, not as a technical upgrade, but as a creeping encirclement.

By erasing the ridge and treating the basin as stable, NATO and EU actors could present their policy as low-risk housekeeping. They were not redesigning the European security architecture; they were simply extending its benefits to a deserving neighbor. Any disturbance that resulted was then ascribed entirely to Russian irrationality or malice, never to the cumulative effect of Western moves in a known-sensitive region. The high-gain character of the system was edited out of public discourse, even as internal documents continued to flag it.

3.3 Ignoring Russian red lines without endorsing Russian narratives

One of the most difficult intellectual tasks in this period would have been to distinguish between acknowledging Russian red lines and endorsing Russian narratives. To acknowledge a red line is to admit that the other side cares enough about an issue to act violently if certain thresholds are crossed. To endorse a narrative is to agree with the way the other side justifies its actions morally or historically. The two are not the same.

A complexity-aware West could have said, explicitly: "We do not accept Russia's claim to a sphere of influence over its neighbors. We reject its propaganda about protecting compatriots and its distortions of history. But we recognize that it is both willing and able to use force if certain moves are made in Ukraine, and we must design our policy with that risk in mind." This would have kept values clear while keeping the system's dynamics in view.

Instead, any attempt to talk about red lines tended to be conflated with "repeating Russian talking points." To suggest that pushing NATO's functional perimeter deeper into Ukraine might provoke a military response was taken, in many policy circles, as a form of appeasement or moral weakness. The result was that Western strategy evolved in a discursive environment where the only respectable position was to deny that the ridge existed. The sensitivity of the configuration was banished from polite conversation, even as it grew more dangerous in practice.

This suppression of nuance did not make Russian red lines disappear. It merely ensured that when they were enforced, Western publics would experience the outcome as a shocking eruption of unprovoked evil rather than as one of several predictable branches in a badly managed system. It also meant that, once war began, there was little appetite to revisit the

design of the preceding policy. If acknowledging that the ridge was real made one sound like a Kremlin proxy, then it was safer to continue pretending that the basin had always been flat.

3.4 The first layer of lipstick: moral absolutism as risk cover

Moral language played a central role in covering the risks that policymakers were taking. By framing their strategy as an unambiguous defense of good against evil, they transformed a high-stakes gamble at a system ridge into an ethical imperative. The more absolute the moral framing, the less space there was to question whether the move being justified was wise. After all, if one believes that supporting "freedom" and "European choice" is categorically good, then any talk of escalation dynamics sounds like cowardice or complicity.

This moral absolutism performed several functions at once. It provided emotional energy for actions that, in more sober terms, might have looked reckless. It simplified complex trade-offs into binary choices that could be sold to voters and parliaments. It also offered retrospective protection: if things went badly, leaders could claim that they had erred, if at all, on the side of virtue. The pig might be bruised and dangerous, but it was a righteous pig.

Calling this "lipstick" is not an attempt to deny the reality of values or to suggest moral equivalence between all actors. It is a way of naming a pattern in which moral language is layered onto structurally risky behavior in order to make that behavior resistant to critique. Once the first layer of lipstick is applied, any effort to wipe it off can be represented as an attack on beauty itself. The system becomes harder to steer because questioning its trajectory looks, to many, like betraying its soul.

The tragedy is that this use of moral absolutism does not actually protect the values it invokes. It exposes them to the catastrophic consequences of misjudged strategy. When the ridge finally collapses into war, when cities are shelled and economies are deformed, it is not enough to say that the cause was noble. The task, if one truly cares about democracy and freedom, is to ensure that they are pursued in ways that do not systematically amplify risk at the most dangerous points in the system. The first layer of lipstick made that conversation almost impossible at the moment when it was most needed.

4. Narrative Cosmetics II: Energy "Security" and Economic Self-Harm

If democracy and freedom provided the first coat of narrative gloss, "energy security" provided the second. The word "security" in this context was doing quiet but powerful work. It suggested that Europe's energy system was simply being made safer and more robust, when in fact it was being radically reconfigured in ways that redistributed risk, cost, and leverage. Victoria Nuland's public line on energy was straightforward: Europe should reduce dependence on Russian gas,

diversify supplies, and accept transitional discomfort as the price of greater long-term autonomy. The subtext was more complicated. Diversification pointed strongly toward American liquefied natural gas and toward a deeper enmeshment of European infrastructure and law with U.S. strategic priorities.

In this story, projects like Nord Stream became villains rather than symbols of interdependence. Their cancellation or sabotage could be framed as necessary corrections to past naïveté, rather than as shocks to a carefully tuned industrial ecosystem. The resulting spikes in prices, shifts in competitive advantage, and structural strains on European manufacturing were treated as unfortunate but unavoidable side effects of a moral and strategic awakening. Once again, the ridge in the system disappeared from view. The fact that European prosperity had been built, in part, on relatively cheap and predictable energy inflows from the east was reframed as a kind of original sin that had to be repented, however painful the penance.

4.1 Nuland's energy diversification script and Nord Stream politics

In speech after speech, Nuland and her colleagues advanced a consistent energy script. Europe, they argued, had become dangerously dependent on Russian gas, allowing Moscow to wield pipelines as weapons. The cure was diversification: new LNG terminals, new suppliers, regulatory changes to constrain Russian firms, and support for infrastructure that could bring in fuel from “trusted partners.” On the surface, this was a simple security story. Below the surface, it was also an industrial policy story, with clear implications for who would sell what to whom.

Nord Stream 1 and 2 were at the center of this politics. To many in Berlin, these pipelines were a way to secure reliable supply and deepen economic interdependence that, in theory, would reduce incentives for conflict. To many in Washington and parts of Eastern Europe, they were strategic traps, tying the continent's economic heart too tightly to Moscow. When Nuland spoke of “over-reliance” and called for alternative arrangements, she was not simply describing a technical vulnerability. She was participating in an effort to delegitimize a particular model of German-led European energy policy in favor of a different model aligned with U.S. preferences.

The controversy around Nord Stream dramatized a deeper question: is mutual dependence a deterrent or a liability? The energy diversification script answered firmly on the liability side. It implied that Europe's existing configuration was a quasi-suicidal mistake that had to be reversed quickly, even at high cost. That framing made it easier to present subsequent shocks as necessary surgery rather than as the predictable consequence of a deliberate decoupling campaign conducted without a clear plan for preserving industrial competitiveness.

4.2 From decoupling to deindustrialization: Europe's invisible bill

The word “decoupling” sounds abstract. In practice, it meant doing something very concrete: replacing a flow of relatively cheap pipeline gas with more expensive imports, often in liquefied

form, while simultaneously managing a major security crisis and accelerating an energy transition. For households, this showed up as higher bills and inflation. For industry, it showed up as eroded margins, plant closures, and decisions to invest elsewhere. The invisible bill for energy diversification arrived in the form of weakened European manufacturing and growing anxiety about long-term competitiveness.

This process was not instantaneous. At first, emergency measures and state subsidies cushioned the blow. Governments stepped in to cap prices, compensate utilities, and offer relief packages. The narrative remained focused on resilience and solidarity. Only gradually did it become clear that some of the changes were structural. Energy-intensive sectors began to look for opportunities in jurisdictions with more favorable cost profiles. Strategic discussions in boardrooms shifted from “how do we ride out this crisis?” to “is Europe still a rational place to expand heavy industry?”

All of this happened largely off-stage in the public narratives of energy security. The focus remained on independence from Russian leverage, not on dependence on new suppliers or on the long-term arithmetic of industrial energy costs. The idea that decoupling could slide into deindustrialization was rarely admitted in the same sentences that praised diversification. To do so would have invited a more honest debate about trade-offs: how much economic base is Europe willing to sacrifice to achieve what degree of geopolitical distance from Moscow, and on whose terms.

4.3 How U.S. leverage grew as Europe’s structural autonomy shrank

One of the least discussed aspects of the energy transition was the way it reshaped power inside the Western bloc. As Europe reduced its reliance on Russian gas, it increased reliance on alternative sources that were not politically neutral. American LNG exporters were among the obvious beneficiaries. So were producers aligned with U.S. security policy. Over time, this translated into a shift in leverage. The ability to supply or withhold key energy flows became more tightly coupled to Washington’s strategic calculations.

This did not require any conspiracy. It flowed naturally from the way the system was rewired. When pipelines from Russia were treated as suspect or shut down, and new terminals were built to receive seaborne cargoes from friendly suppliers, Europe’s room for autonomous energy policy narrowed. Decisions about sanctions, price caps, and shipping insurance increasingly passed through channels in which American preferences held significant weight. European leaders could still speak of “energy sovereignty,” but the structural conditions of that sovereignty were weaker.

At the same time, the narrative of diversification made it difficult to name this as a problem. To point out that European structural autonomy was shrinking could be painted as nostalgia for

Russian gas or as ingratitude toward allies. As with the democracy script, moral language did double duty: it obscured the practical consequences of policy while elevating those consequences to the level of necessary sacrifice. The more Europe's position in the energy system resembled that of a client, the more its own elites insisted that it was becoming freer.

4.4 The second layer of lipstick: calling dependence “resilience”

In this context, the term “resilience” became the second layer of lipstick. Official communications sang the virtues of a Europe that had weathered energy blackmail and emerged stronger, diversified, and more secure. The underlying changes in cost structure, industrial viability, and strategic dependence were painted over with stories of heroic adaptation. Resilience, in this usage, meant the capacity to survive after having lost certain options, not the ability to choose among many futures from a position of strength.

Calling the new configuration “resilient” inverted the direction of dependence. Being less reliant on Russia was equated with being less reliant in general, as if all suppliers were interchangeable and all political relationships equivalent. The fact that Europe's energy and security now hinged more heavily on the good will and domestic politics of the United States was treated as benign or even invisible. The vocabulary of resilience thus served to naturalize a narrowing of autonomy as a broadening of safety.

This second layer of lipstick also interacted with the first. If decoupling from Russia could be framed both as a moral imperative and as an exercise in resilience, then questioning its pace or design looked like both ethical backsliding and strategic naïveté. In such an environment, it became hard to ask whether Europe's current woes—high energy prices, industrial strain, and the looming specter of a 2030 confrontation—were in any sense self-inflicted. The story said they were the price of freedom and security. The system, viewed coldly, suggested that they were also the price of walking into a reconfiguration whose risks and power shifts had never been honestly presented.

The pig, in this phase, is the reshaped European energy and industrial base, more fragile and more dependent than before. The lipstick is a narrative in which that fragility is renamed resilience and that dependence is sold as liberation. As with the political layer, the danger is not only that the public is misled. It is that decision-makers themselves come to believe their own cosmetics, making it harder to reverse course before the next shock arrives.

5. From Minsk to Full-Scale War: When the System Snapped

After 2014, the system did not immediately tumble into the basin of open, large-scale war. Instead, it settled into a precarious plateau: the Minsk process. On the surface, the Minsk I and

II agreements looked like attempts to stabilize the situation in eastern Ukraine and create a roadmap toward a political settlement. In practice, they functioned as a holding pattern in which none of the key actors fundamentally altered their trajectories. The ridge was no longer entirely intact, but the slide into the deeper basin had not yet fully begun. Political language suggested de-escalation; structural dynamics pointed elsewhere.

During these years, a strange duality prevailed. Officially, there was a “peace process,” however flawed. Unofficially, all sides behaved as if they were buying time. Ukraine sought to rebuild its armed forces and secure deeper Western support. Russia entrenched its position in Crimea and the Donbas, tested red lines, and experimented with hybrid tactics. Europe and the United States layered sanctions on Russia while continuing many ordinary economic interactions, hoping that pressure would alter Moscow’s calculus over time. The system oscillated around the fault line, accumulating stress.

This chapter looks at the moment when that stress resolved into a snap. It treats the 2022 invasion not as an inexplicable bolt from the blue, but as what engineers would call a predictable surprise: an event whose general form was foreseeable once the configuration and loading of the structure were understood, even if the exact timing and scale were not. It then follows the subsequent rounds of sanctions and counter-adaptation, asking who has actually been weakened, and along which dimensions, in the years since the war became explicit.

5.1 The Minsk limbo: frozen conflict as delayed bifurcation

The Minsk agreements froze the line of contact in eastern Ukraine without resolving the underlying dispute over the country’s orientation and sovereignty. On paper, they promised a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, restoration of Ukrainian control over its borders, and some form of special status for the contested regions. On the ground, violations were constant, implementation was partial, and the political provisions remained ambiguous enough for each side to interpret them according to its own narratives.

From a dynamical perspective, this was a form of metastability. The system had been jolted by the events of 2014, but instead of quickly settling into a new clear basin, it became stuck in a shallow, jagged depression. The Donbas simmered as a low-intensity war, absorbing attention and lives without forcing a definitive redesign of the broader security architecture. Western capitals could pretend that the crisis had been “managed,” even as Ukraine remained neither fully neutral, nor fully integrated into Western structures, nor ceded to Russia’s sphere.

This limbo had several corrosive effects. It normalized the idea that small-scale violence along the contact line was tolerable as long as it did not spill too far beyond. It allowed political leaders to speak the language of peace while planning for future contingencies of renewed conflict. It encouraged all parties to invest in capabilities they might need “if Minsk fails,” rather

than in institutions that would make failure less likely. Above all, it delayed the recognition that the system was still perched precariously, not resting on stable ground.

The Minsk years were thus less a period of genuine conflict resolution than a kind of delayed bifurcation. The underlying questions—about NATO’s limits, Russia’s tolerance for Ukrainian Westernization, Europe’s willingness to defend Kyiv, and the future of the European energy and security order—were left unanswered. Instead, the conflict was compartmentalized, as though long enough time in the freezer would somehow thaw into a new equilibrium without anyone choosing it. That assumption turned out to be wrong.

5.2 2022 as predictable surprise in a kicked system

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many political narratives treated it as unthinkable until the moment it happened. In retrospect, it is clear that it was neither unthinkable nor without warning. Build-ups of troops and matériel, increasingly explicit rhetoric, and the collapse of diplomatic channels all pointed to a high probability of a major attack once certain thresholds were crossed. What made the invasion a “surprise” was less the absence of signals than the reluctance to integrate those signals into a revised mental model of the system.

In a kicked, high-gain system, this kind of surprise is common. Actors project stability onto configurations that feel familiar, even when underlying parameters have changed. The memory of previous crises that did not escalate—Georgia, earlier Ukraine flare-ups, various confrontations in the air and sea—reinforced the belief that Moscow ultimately preferred calibrated brinkmanship to all-out war. This belief persisted even as Russia’s leadership signaled growing impatience with Minsk and a willingness to absorb higher costs to prevent what it framed as further NATO encroachment.

None of this exonerates Russia. The decision to invade was a choice, not an automatic outcome of structural conditions. It involved political calculations, ideological narratives, and a readiness to use large-scale violence to impose a preferred order. But from the perspective of system analysis, it also fit a pattern: a heavily stressed configuration, held in an unstable limbo for years, eventually snapping along its weakest lines. To call this “predictable” is not to claim exact foresight; it is to say that war was always one of the main branches available once the ridge had been kicked.

The way the invasion caught many Western leaders rhetorically flat-footed reveals something important about narrative cosmetics. For years, they had told their publics a story in which Western policy in Ukraine was fundamentally stabilizing and morally straightforward. Acknowledging that this policy existed in a highly sensitive, nonlinear environment would have complicated that story. When the environment finally asserted itself, the easiest move was to

treat the shock as an eruption of pure malignancy from one side, rather than as the resolution of a long-growing instability. That move protected reputations at the cost of understanding.

5.3 Sanctions, adaptation, and Russia's war-economy turn

The immediate Western response to the invasion, aside from military aid to Ukraine, was a cascade of sanctions. These targeted Russian banks, elites, technology imports, energy exports, and more. Some measures were unprecedented in their scope. The stated goals ranged from punishing aggression and constraining war-making capacity to, in some narratives, inducing such economic pain that Russia would be forced to change course or even face internal upheaval.

Sanctions are themselves interventions in a complex adaptive system. They do not simply subtract capacity; they also trigger substitution, innovation, and re-routing. In Russia's case, the initial shock was severe, but the system did not collapse. Instead, it began to reconfigure. Trade patterns shifted toward non-Western partners. Domestic production of certain goods was ramped up, sometimes crudely, sometimes effectively. The state tightened control over strategic sectors, consolidated information channels, and moved further toward a war-economy footing in which civilian and military production were more tightly integrated.

This adaptive process did not come for free. Russian citizens faced inflation, shortages, and a narrowing of consumer choice. Long-term technological and productivity impacts remain uncertain. But the overall direction was clear: rather than being broken, the Russian system was being re-optimized for a more closed, militarized environment. The war economy became not a temporary emergency but a developing equilibrium, with its own logic and interest groups.

From the outside, this was often misread. Early commentary that predicted rapid collapse or decisive weakening gave way, in some quarters, to silence rather than to a frank reassessment. The sanctions story had been told as a tale of leverage: the West would exert economic pressure, Russia would bend. When Russia bent less than expected and adapted more than anticipated, it became awkward to revisit the underlying assumptions. Yet without such a reassessment, it is difficult to answer the most basic question: who is actually being weakened, and on what timescale?

5.4 Who actually weakened whom? A cold balance sheet

Looking back from the vantage point of several war years, a cold balance sheet does not flatter the narrative that Western policy primarily weakened Russia. Russia has been damaged and distorted. It has lost soldiers, matériel, and access to certain technologies. It faces a narrower set of economic partners, and its long-term demographic and innovation prospects are uncertain. But it has also entrenched control over new territories in Ukraine, hardened its

society against external pressure, and accelerated its integration into alternative economic networks.

Europe, meanwhile, has paid a different kind of price. It has absorbed millions of refugees, which is both a humanitarian duty and a social challenge. It has seen energy costs spike, supply chains rearranged, and long-cherished industrial models come under strain. Its defense budgets have risen sharply, diverting resources from other priorities. Its publics have been conditioned to view a long-term confrontation with Russia as normal, even as they are asked to accept lower growth and higher insecurity. The strategic autonomy that Europe once debated as a goal now looks more remote than ever.

The United States has fared better in relative terms. Its homeland is not directly threatened. Its energy sector has benefited from Europe's reorientation. Its defense industry has expanded order books. Its geopolitical narrative has been partially vindicated in the sense that many allies now see dependence on Washington as less optional. At the same time, Washington has locked itself more deeply into a confrontation with both Russia and, indirectly, with other states skeptical of its use of sanctions and financial tools.

A cold balance sheet does not deliver a simple answer to "who weakened whom." It suggests a more unsettling conclusion: the system as a whole has been driven into a configuration that is worse for almost everyone along different axes, but that entrenches certain patterns of dependence and confrontation. Russia is more militarized and less integrated. Europe is more anxious and less autonomous. The United States is more central to its bloc but more entangled in open-ended commitments.

In this light, the earlier narrative cosmetics stand out in sharper relief. The promise was that supporting democracy in Ukraine, diversifying energy, and sanctioning aggression would lead to a safer, freer, more resilient Europe and a chastened Russia. The reality looks more like a mutual narrowing of futures, with particular costs borne by those least responsible for the initial design of the policy. The pig has grown leaner and meaner; the lipstick has grown thicker.

6. 2030 War and the "War Economy": Lipstick for a Chosen Basin

By the mid-2020s, the language surrounding Europe's security had shifted from crisis management to long-term mobilization. Where earlier documents spoke of "strategic patience" and "conflict prevention," senior officials began to invoke a different horizon: a looming test somewhere between three and ten years out. Russia, they said, was preparing for a confrontation around 2030. Armed forces must ready themselves for a "shock" in three or four years. Societies must be prepared to "lose their children" and to accept economic hardship as defense production takes priority.

This discourse did not emerge in a vacuum. It arrived after a decade in which Western policy had treated Ukraine as a project space, mishandled the Minsk plateau, failed to prevent a full-scale invasion, and responded with sanctions and energy shifts that warped Europe's economic base. Instead of prompting institutional self-interrogation, these outcomes were reframed as the unavoidable prelude to a new era of danger. The basin of long-term confrontation with Russia, into which the system had been pushed, was relabeled as a natural landscape feature: regrettable, but given.

Talk of a "war economy" and a possible 2030 clash thus serves a double function. It orients budgets, industries, and public psychology toward permanent rearmament. At the same time, it offers a form of absolution: if a great war is coming regardless, then earlier policy choices matter less. The basin was not chosen; it was discovered. This chapter argues the opposite. The basin was chosen through a sequence of high-gain interventions. The "2030 war" narrative is lipstick applied to that choice.

6.1 Generals' talk of "shock in three, four years" and "losing our children"

The new rhetoric is perhaps clearest in the words of senior military leaders. When a chief of defense tells parliament that his first objective is to prepare the armed forces for a "shock" in three or four years, he is not merely describing routine readiness. He is popularizing a timeline, inscribing it into public consciousness. When the same or similar figures tell mayors and citizens that the country must be ready to "lose its children" and to "suffer economically" as defense production is prioritized, they are doing more than offering a grim reminder of war's reality. They are normalizing the idea that large-scale sacrifice is a likely and even necessary aspect of the near future.

These statements function as narrative markers. They close the distance between abstract planning documents and ordinary life. Parents are invited to imagine their children as potential casualties in a foreseeable confrontation. Workers are told to anticipate lower consumption so that factories can shift to military output. The war that once lived on maps and in classified briefings is brought into kitchens and town halls.

It is important to see how different this is from the traditional language of deterrence. Deterrence, at least in its more cautious formulations, emphasizes readiness in order to prevent war. It talks about capabilities so that they will not have to be used. The new rhetoric, by contrast, leans toward a conditional inevitability. The shock is coming; the question is whether society will stand firm. The loss of children is presented as a test of national character, not as a failure of policy to avoid catastrophe. The psychological center of gravity moves from "never again" to "will you stand when again comes?"

6.2 Recasting policy failure as exogenous fate: “Russia is preparing war by 2030”

The claim that “Russia is preparing for a confrontation by 2030” is, on one level, an intelligence assessment about force structure, doctrine, and reconstitution timelines. On another level, it is a narrative maneuver. It relocates the origin of the current basin entirely onto the other side. War becomes a scheduled event on Russia’s calendar, not a branch that emerged from a decade of interacting choices in a sensitive system.

This framing is convenient. It allows leaders to glide over the cumulative impact of Western decisions: the way Ukraine was handled as a project of alignment rather than a bridge, the failure to convert the Minsk limbo into a stable settlement, the design of sanctions and energy policies that pushed Europe into a position of economic vulnerability. All of that can be acknowledged piecemeal while still asserting that, fundamentally, the main story is that Russia “always meant to fight” and has simply moved along a prewritten script.

In this telling, 2030 is destiny rather than the product of feedback loops. The West and Europe are cast as responders, not as co-authors. Citizens who hear that Russia is moving inexorably toward confrontation are less likely to ask how their own institutions contributed to the conditions in which such a confrontation now seems plausible. They are more likely to accept that their role is to prepare bravely for what is coming, not to question why it is being presented as unavoidable.

The shift from “we misread and mis-designed a boundary system” to “they were always going to come for us” is the core of the recasting. It is a story that contains truths about Russian choices, but it is arranged in such a way that those truths obscure earlier Western agency rather than illuminate it.

6.3 How the 2030 script justifies permanent rearmament and avoids self-critique

Once installed, the 2030 script performs powerful work in budgetary and industrial politics. A confrontation horizon several years out is ideal for planning long-lead investments. It justifies enlarging munitions plants, ordering new platforms, reshaping training curricula, and lobbying for exemptions from fiscal constraints. It also supports a narrative of “war economy” in which whole sectors of society are asked to accept redirection of resources and political attention.

This is not, in itself, illegitimate. States facing genuine security threats sometimes need to rearm. The problem lies in the absence of accompanying self-critique. The shift to a war-economy logic has not been paired with a transparent reckoning about how previous strategic design contributed to the current danger. Instead, rearmament is presented as an almost technocratic necessity, arising from external conditions that could not have been meaningfully altered.

Under these conditions, calls for accountability can be deflected as destabilizing or even disloyal. If the narrative says that “we are in the opening stages of a generational struggle,” then pausing to examine who pushed the system where begins to look like a luxury that cannot be afforded. This logic is particularly attractive to those who designed earlier policy. They can now present themselves as the indispensable managers of the next phase, rather than as architects of a trajectory that requires correction.

The 2030 script also narrows the space for alternative visions. Proposals for de-escalation, diplomatic restructuring, or new security arrangements are easily framed as naive or as playing into the adversary’s hands. If the horizon is structurally warlike, then peace initiatives can be dismissed as wishful thinking or as covert defeatism. The basin of confrontation, once chosen, is defended as if it were the only realistic landscape feature, and industrial mobilization is treated as the only adult response.

6.4 Self-fulfilling trajectories in a high-gain geopolitical system

In a high-gain system, expectations are not mere descriptions; they are inputs. When officials tell their own societies that a confrontation is likely by 2030, and design forces and doctrines around that expectation, they alter the system’s future states. When they broadcast that expectation to adversaries and allies alike, they shape how others plan as well. Russia, hearing that NATO assumes a coming clash, may double down on its own preparations. Neutrals may adjust their hedging strategies. Smaller allies may become more nervous and press for even harder lines.

In such a context, the 2030 narrative risks becoming a self-fulfilling trajectory. It does not guarantee war. It does, however, reduce the range of plausible futures in which war is avoided. It moves resources, postures, and mindsets toward configurations that make miscalculation more likely and compromise more difficult. It also creates sunk costs. The more money and political capital are invested in a war-economy posture, the harder it becomes for leaders to pivot without seeming to admit error.

From a logistic perspective, one might say that $q_{\text{West}}(t)$ has written a script and mistaken it for $\tau_{\text{security}}(t)$. The system’s agents are now acting out a story in which 2030 is a climactic test. The more convincingly they inhabit that story, the more the system’s actual dynamics bend toward confrontational outcomes. The pig is not only wearing lipstick; it is being trained to charge.

A complexity-aware ethic would recognize this danger and deliberately resist it. It would treat talk of 2030 war as a model, not as a prophecy, and would constantly interrogate whether policy is expanding or shrinking the set of peaceful paths. It would pair any move toward rearmament with transparent assessment of past mistakes and with active exploration of architectures that

reduce gain at the most sensitive nodes. It would, in short, refuse to let a chosen basin masquerade as fate.

Instead, the current discourse leans the other way. It uses the language of inevitability to justify permanent mobilization, while leaving intact the habits of mind that produced the instability in the first place. That is why the 2030 war narrative is best understood as a second-generation cosmetic: not just lipstick on the original decision to kick the ridge in 2014, but lipstick on the entire process of sliding into the basin and declaring it home.

7. Logistic Reading: $q_{\text{West}}(t)$ Mistaking Its Script for τ

Up to this point, the argument has been largely descriptive: a sequence of interventions on a sensitive geopolitical ridge, the gradual slide into a basin of confrontation, and the application of narratives to make that slide look like fate. A logistic reading adds a different layer. It asks how the internal states of the major actors—what they believe, reward, and optimize—have diverged from any plausible notion of true security, and how they have then mistaken this divergence for necessity.

In logistics, $q(t)$ denotes the finite, contingent state of an agent or community, and τ denotes a living structure of truth or right alignment that exists independently of any one actor's scripts. In this context, $q_{\text{US}}(t)$, $q_{\text{EU}}(t)$, $q_{\text{Ukraine}}(t)$, and $q_{\text{Russia}}(t)$ are not simply what these actors say. They are the evolving internal configurations of assumptions, incentives, and narratives that drive actual behavior. τ_{security} is not what any one side declares "security" to mean. It is the set of structures that would, if realized, minimize the risk of catastrophic war, preserve room for plural futures, and maintain basic human flourishing on the continent.

The problem, in this view, is not only that policy has gone wrong. It is that the West's self-conception— $q_{\text{West}}(t)$ —has taken its own storylines as proxies for τ_{security} , and then doubled down on those storylines even as evidence accumulated that they were amplifying risk. Narrative cosmetics are not just public relations. They are curvature applied to $q(t)$, bending perception away from τ and making it harder to see who kicked the basin and when.

7.1 Defining q_{US} , q_{EU} , q_{Ukraine} , q_{Russia} in 2014–2025

In 2014, $q_{\text{US}}(t)$ contained several stable elements. There was confidence in the post–Cold War script of NATO and EU expansion as instruments of stability and democratization. There was a belief that Washington could shape political outcomes in key states without paying the full price of direct control. There was an assumption that economic and technological leverage could

discipline adversaries over time. There was also a conviction that U.S. leadership of “the West” was both natural and benign.

$q_{EU}(t)$ was more divided. Some members prioritized economic integration with Russia and saw interdependence as a peace mechanism. Others, particularly in the east, saw Russia primarily as a threat and viewed deeper Western integration for Ukraine as an existential necessity. At the institutional level, $q_{EU}(t)$ oscillated between aspirations to strategic autonomy and reliance on U.S. security guarantees, often resolving the tension by postponing hard choices. The union’s internal narrative emphasized norms and law, but its operational dependence on NATO diluted its ability to act as an independent security pole.

$q_{Ukraine}(t)$ in 2014 was a tangle of genuine civic aspirations, oligarchic interests, regional cleavages, and survival instincts. Many citizens wanted cleaner governance and closer ties with Europe. Others feared economic collapse or cultural marginalization if ties with Russia were abruptly severed. The state apparatus was infiltrated by competing external influences. Its security forces were under-resourced and, in some cases, compromised. The internal narrative was not unified; it was contested under pressure.

$q_{Russia}(t)$ combined a sense of historical grievance over NATO’s eastward movement, an elite narrative of encirclement and humiliation, and genuine fear that Ukraine’s definitive integration into Western structures would permanently degrade Russia’s strategic position. That narrative coexisted with imperial reflexes and domestic political incentives to rally the population around external threats. For the leadership, the memory of previous Western interventions, from Kosovo to Iraq and Libya, reinforced the sense that rules were selectively applied and that passivity at the boundary would invite losses.

By 2025, all four q ’s had evolved under stress. $q_{US}(t)$ had absorbed the experience of a major war in Europe without direct U.S. casualties, a sanctions regime that hurt but did not break Russia, and a partial reindustrialization of its own defense and energy sectors. $q_{EU}(t)$ had absorbed economic shocks, a refugee influx, and the normalization of permanent confrontation rhetoric. $q_{Ukraine}(t)$ had endured invasion, occupation, and a forced redefinition of sovereignty under fire. $q_{Russia}(t)$ had hardened into a war-economy posture and a deeper story of civilizational conflict with the West.

None of these internal states matched $\tau_{security}$. They were shaped by fear, inertia, and domestic politics as much as by sober assessment of shared risk. Yet each was increasingly treated by its own elites as if it were the natural, almost inevitable configuration— $q(t)$ mistaken for τ .

7.2 The basin shift from ambiguous order to hard confrontation

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the European order was ambiguous. The line between “inside” and “outside” the Western security architecture was real but permeable, especially in economic and cultural terms. Ukraine inhabited that ambiguity in an especially intense way. τ_{security} , in such a setting, might have pointed toward architectures that preserved ambiguity in controlled forms: formalized neutrality, shared security arrangements, institutionalized constraints on unilateral moves at the boundary.

Instead, the combination of $q_{\text{US}}(t)$ and parts of $q_{\text{EU}}(t)$ favored progressive clarification—bringing more states fully into the Western basin. The assumption was that the basin itself was both stable and benign, and that Russia would eventually adapt to its shrinkage. $q_{\text{Russia}}(t)$, conversely, evolved in a direction that treated this clarification as intolerable encroachment. $q_{\text{Ukraine}}(t)$ was pulled and pushed between these fields, with internal actors aligning to one or the other.

The events of 2014, the mishandling of the Minsk plateau, the 2022 invasion, and the subsequent sanctions and energy policies together pushed the system out of the ambiguous basin into a more rigid one: hard confrontation. In this new basin, assumptions about the other side’s hostility became axiomatic. Economic disentangling, military build-up, and narrative hardening reinforced one another. τ_{security} did not move. The system moved away from it.

From a logostic standpoint, the tragedy is that this basin shift was not necessary. It was one of several possible outcomes at a sensitive ridge, but not the only one. Yet once the system had rolled down the slope, the new configuration was presented as if it had been inevitable all along. The story changed from “we are expanding a zone of peace” to “we are defending ourselves in a civilizational struggle,” without a corresponding admission that the earlier story had underestimated risk and overestimated control.

7.3 Narrative cosmetics as curvature: bending perception away from τ_{security}

Narrative cosmetics—democracy talk, energy security rhetoric, 2030 war horizons—are not just ways of speaking. They are curvature applied to $q(t)$. They bend the internal representation of the situation so that trajectories that move further from τ_{security} can still feel aligned and even virtuous from the inside.

When regime engineering is framed as pure democratization, it becomes harder for $q_{\text{US}}(t)$ or $q_{\text{EU}}(t)$ to recognize that it is acting at a high-gain ridge. The moral glow of supporting “choice” reduces the perceived need for structural redesign. When energy reconfiguration is presented as resilience, it becomes harder to see the loss of industrial autonomy and the new forms of dependence created. When a self-chosen basin of confrontation is narrated as a looming 2030

test imposed by an implacable adversary, it becomes harder to ask how different choices in 2014–2015 might have kept the system nearer to τ .

Curvature is dangerous in a system that already has high gain. Small perceived deviations between q and τ can, over time, accumulate into large actual divergences in the state space. If an actor believes that every move it makes is in the direction of security and freedom, even when some moves objectively increase the risk of catastrophic war, then correction becomes unlikely until a shock forces it. At that point, narrative cosmetics are applied again to explain away the discrepancy: the shock is recoded as exogenous evil, not as feedback on misalignment.

In this way, narrative cosmetics become self-reinforcing. Each coat makes it harder to see the previous misalignment. Each appeal to values that have been put at risk by misjudged strategy makes it harder to admit that strategy needs change. τ_{security} does not disappear, but it becomes harder to approximate, because the internal compass that should point toward it has been magnetized by storylines that serve other needs.

7.4 “Ignorance is bliss” vs seeing who kicked the basin

For ordinary citizens, there is a real sense in which ignorance can feel like bliss. If one trusts that leaders know what they are doing, that expansions and interventions are fundamentally stabilizing, and that any resulting turbulence is simply the work of hostile forces, then the world looks chaotic but meaningful. Sacrifices can be accepted as the necessary cost of defending what is good. There is comfort in believing that the ridge was solid ground until someone else shook it.

The logostic perspective strips away that comfort. It insists on asking who kicked the basin and when. It does not deny that other actors also kicked it, sometimes harder. But it refuses to let any side's $q(t)$ be conflated with τ . It refuses to let moral language substitute for structural analysis. It refuses to treat narratives about inevitability as sufficient explanation for trajectories that were, at earlier points, subject to choice.

Seeing who kicked the basin is not an exercise in retroactive blame for its own sake. It is a precondition for changing course. If $q_{\text{West}}(t)$ continues to tell itself that the slide into the confrontation basin was delivered by history, rather than facilitated by a particular style of statecraft and self-conception, then the next set of choices at the next ridge will be made with the same blind spots. The lipstick will change color; the pig will remain.

The loss of “ignorance is bliss” therefore comes with a gain: the possibility of repentance in a structural sense. Repentance here does not mean mere regret. It means turning away from the habits of thought that treated high-gain ridges as normal playgrounds for influence, that underestimated nonlinearities, and that used moral absolutism to launder risk. It means asking

what tau_security would actually require: perhaps less expansion and more architecture, fewer scripts of inevitable clash and more work on reducing gain at the most dangerous nodes.

Once that question is asked, the 2030 war narrative looks different. It stops being a looming fate and starts being a test of whether q_West(t) will continue mistaking its own scripts for tau, or whether it will begin, however late, to align its behavior with a truth structure that does not need pigs or lipstick to be seen.

8. Conclusion – Wiping Off the Lipstick

The story told here has been simple in outline and complex in detail. A boundary state on a high-gain ridge was treated as a project space for Western statecraft. A leaked phone call revealed not just bad manners but a mindset: a belief that outcomes at that ridge could be engineered without fully redesigning the surrounding architecture. A decade of frozen conflict, full-scale war, sanctions, energy reconfiguration, and militarized rhetoric followed. At each step, narrative cosmetics were applied to make the trajectory look less like a sequence of risky choices and more like the unfolding of fate.

Wiping off the lipstick does not mean denying the reality of Russian aggression or Ukrainian agency. It means refusing to let language about democracy, energy security, and unavoidable 2030 confrontations substitute for structural analysis. It means admitting that Europe did not merely suffer a shift from ambiguous order to hard confrontation; it participated in making that shift. It means recognizing that the basin we call “the current security environment” is not a natural feature of the landscape but the product of hands on the ridge.

Once that recognition is allowed, a different set of questions becomes possible. Not “how brave will we be when the shock comes?” but “how can we change the system so that shocks become less likely?” Not “how do we sell the war economy?” but “how do we design an economy that does not require permanent war footing to feel coherent?” Not “who will be the next Nuland?” but “what constraints must future Nulands face so that their confidence cannot drag whole continents toward catastrophe?”

8.1 What changes if Europe admits 2014–2025 as a self-inflicted shift

If Europe were to admit, openly, that the shift from the ambiguous order of the early 2000s to the confrontational basin of the 2020s was partly self-inflicted, several things would change at once.

First, the tone of public discourse would have to move from pure moral accusation outward to shared responsibility inward. It would still be possible, and necessary, to condemn military aggression and war crimes. But it would no longer be intellectually acceptable to pretend that

earlier policies at the Ukrainian ridge were neutral backdrops. Parliamentary debates, media coverage, and academic analyses would have to include uncomfortable questions about expansion logics, regime engineering, and the design of sanctions and energy transitions.

Second, institutional memory would shift. Instead of treating 2014 as the noble beginning of a democracy-support mission that was later betrayed by external evil, European institutions would need to catalogue it as a case of strategic overreach in a complex system. Staff colleges, foreign service academies, and policy schools would have to teach the period as a cautionary tale, not just as a rallying myth. This would change how future officials are trained to think about boundary states and high-gain nodes.

Third, the relationship between European publics and their elites would be affected. Citizens who have been told that all major shocks are exogenous have little leverage to demand structural change. Once it is acknowledged that some shocks were the result of misjudged design, it becomes legitimate to insist on different design. Calls for accountability would no longer be framed only in legal or partisan terms; they would extend to the deeper question of what kinds of grand strategy Europe wants, and on what time horizon.

Finally, admitting the self-inflicted nature of part of the shift would create room for a different kind of solidarity with Ukraine. Instead of seeing Ukraine only as a frontline victim of Russian aggression, Europeans could also see it as a country whose position was made more dangerous by Western experiments on the ridge. That would sharpen the sense of debt, not to escalatory fantasies about 2030, but to serious efforts at reconstruction, security guarantees, and political support that do not treat Ukraine as a permanent buffer to be traded in other people's narratives.

8.2 Minimum conditions for de-escalation in a system already destabilized

De-escalation does not mean returning to some imaginary pre-2014 innocence. The system has already been reshaped by war, annexation, sanctions, and energy shifts. Some doors are closed. But even in this destabilized environment, there are minimum conditions that must be met if the trajectory is to bend away from a 2030 confrontation and toward something closer to tau_security.

One such condition is a clear rejection of further high-gain experiments at the remaining ridges. This means treating states that still straddle fault lines not as prizes in a zero-sum contest but as places where structural neutrality and shared guarantees are actively explored. It means formalizing constraints on unilateral moves that would move security perimeters again without simultaneous architectural redesign.

Another condition is the rebuilding of channels for serious, unsentimental dialogue on red lines and risk thresholds. This does not require believing adversary narratives or accepting spheres of

influence as moral categories. It requires acknowledging that certain moves will predictably trigger dangerous responses, and that avoiding those moves or pairing them with compensating arrangements is a rational, not a cowardly, act.

A third condition is the deliberate lowering of gain on certain couplings. Energy is an obvious example: any further reconfiguration should be judged not only by who gains commercial advantage but by whether it increases or decreases the number of ways crises can propagate across domains. Arms control, long neglected, is another: even in hostile environments, agreements that reduce the risk of accidental escalation or misinterpretation can move the system slightly closer to stability.

Finally, the rhetoric of inevitability must be dialed back. Preparing militaries is one thing; cultivating a public imagination in which large-scale war by a specific date feels almost natural is another. De-escalation requires leaders to speak in ways that preserve psychological room for peaceful futures, even while acknowledging the dangers of the present. If the only futures on offer in political speech are “fight bravely later” or “surrender ignobly now,” the system will continue to drift toward the former, even where better options exist.

8.3 Why future Nulands must be constrained by complexity-aware ethics

Victoria Nuland, in this essay, is both a person and a type: the confident, well-networked official who believes that the world’s most sensitive ridges are suitable sites for decisive interventions in the name of progress. Future Nulands will exist as long as there are institutions that reward such confidence. The question is not whether they can be prevented from rising. It is whether they can be constrained by an ethic that takes complexity seriously.

A complexity-aware ethic would impose several restraints. It would require, as a matter of professional duty, explicit mapping of high-gain configurations before interventions are attempted. Officials would have to demonstrate that they understand where the ridges are, what basins lie on either side, and how their actions could push the system in unintended directions. This would not guarantee wisdom, but it would make ignorance harder to maintain.

It would also require institutionalized dissent. In every major decision involving boundary states, there should be voices whose job it is to argue from the perspective of system risk, not just from the perspective of values or short-term advantage. These voices would not be marginalized as “pessimists” or “appeasers”; they would be recognized as essential components of a functioning decision architecture, akin to safety engineers in high-risk industries.

Moreover, a complexity-aware ethic would demand humility about narrative. Officials would be encouraged to resist using moral absolutes to sell high-risk moves. They could still appeal to values, but they would be required to pair such appeals with candid acknowledgment of uncertainty and cost. The public would hear, not “this is a simple choice between good and

evil,” but “this is a fraught choice in a complex system, and here is why we think it is still the least bad option.” This kind of speech is harder. It is also more compatible with tau.

Finally, such an ethic would extend beyond individuals to the design of alliances. NATO and the EU would need procedures that make it harder for any one capital to use common institutions to pursue risky experiments without collective, fully informed consent. The aim is not to eliminate all boldness; it is to prevent boldness at ridges from being disguised as routine maintenance until the basin gives way.

8.4 Final line: there goes “Ignorance is Bliss”—the pig is still there, but now you see it

In the end, nothing in this analysis makes the underlying realities less harsh. Lives have been lost, territories occupied, economies distorted, and futures narrowed. Wiping off the lipstick does not make the pig disappear. It does, however, change the terms on which we live with it.

“Ignorance is bliss” was possible when it seemed credible that Western policy was simply the extension of peace and order into empty space. That illusion has been broken. The ridge turned out not to be empty, the space not to be neutral. The basin we are in is, at least in part, one that was chosen, not one that was given.

There is no guarantee that seeing this will be enough to change course. But there is one certainty: continuing to adorn the pig with fresh layers of narrative gloss will not bring Europe closer to real security. At some point, a polity that wants to survive has to look at what it has built, acknowledge where it kicked the basin, and decide, eyes open, whether to keep sliding or to start climbing.

There goes “Ignorance is Bliss”: the pig is still there, but now you see it.

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