



Why the West should deter a Russian attack on Ukraine

by Ian Bond, 30 November 2021

Russian forces are massing near Ukraine's border again. Putin hopes to win concessions from Kyiv without fighting, but more concessions will not bring peace. The West should focus on deterring Russia.

For the second time this year, Russian forces are massing near Ukraine's north-eastern and southern borders, flanking the areas of the Donbas region that they or their local proxies have controlled since invading Ukraine in 2014. In April, more than 100,000 Russian troops were deployed in regions near Ukraine, ostensibly for exercises. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence claims there are now as many as 90,000 in the area again. The Kremlin has been conducting an information campaign against Ukraine for several months, questioning its sovereignty. Russia may be preparing to invade, or merely intending to intimidate. As NATO foreign ministers meet in Riga on November 30th and December 1st, they should consider how to deter Moscow, reassure Kyiv and minimise instability in Eastern Europe.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made no secret of his views on Ukraine. In 2008, when the Bucharest NATO summit meeting promised Ukraine and Georgia membership, Putin [told](#) US President George W Bush: "You understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state!". In 2013, questioned by Charles Grant about his attitude to Ukraine, Putin [said](#): "We have common traditions, a common mentality, a common history and a common culture.... I want to repeat again, we are one people... [Ukraine] is part of our greater Russian, or Russian-Ukrainian, world".

This year Putin has returned to his theme. In a long [article](#) published in July, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', Putin argued that modern Ukraine was "entirely the product of the Soviet era ... shaped – for a significant part – on the lands of historical Russia", and blamed the West for seeking to turn Ukraine into an "anti-Moscow Russia". Former Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, currently the deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, followed up in October with an [article](#) likening Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (who is Jewish) to German Jewish intellectuals who asked to serve in the SS; Medvedev's conclusion was that there was no point in talking to Ukrainian vassals of Western masters.

The Kremlin is using these narratives to convey different messages to different audiences. The Russian population is supposed to feel threatened by the West's 'puppet regime' in Kyiv, and to believe that

the Ukrainian population would, if given the chance, rather be part of the Russian world than the West (even though [opinion polls](#) show most Ukrainians support EU membership, and a plurality favour NATO membership). The message to Ukrainians is that they are being used as cannon fodder by the West: were it not for the ‘neo-Nazis’ who took power in Kyiv in the 2014 ‘coup’, they could return to their spiritual and cultural home in the Russian world, and have peace in their country. And for the West, the message is that Ukraine will always matter more to Russia than it does to the West. Consequently, it should not be treated as a sovereign state, but as a historical anomaly that will inevitably gravitate towards Moscow.

Putin has framed his intentions towards Ukraine in different ways at different times. In 2014, he spoke of ‘Novorossiya’ – a province of the pre-1917 Russian Empire that covered large parts of southern and eastern Ukraine – in a way that implied that he had ambitions to control the territory again. His July article suggested that Ukraine, Belarus and Russia were all originally part of one ‘Russian world’, which was subsequently divided by Russia’s enemies. But he might settle for something less than absorption of all or part of Ukraine, ensuring only that it remains neutral and neutralised – permanently prevented from seeking EU or NATO membership. It is safe to assume that the more he can get, by whatever means but at a reasonable cost, the more he will take.

The information barrage has been accompanied by the deployment of Russian forces towards the Ukrainian border. Though the number of troops believed to be in the area is slightly smaller than in Spring, Ukrainian military intelligence has [assessed](#) that there are still around 1200 tanks (almost six times as many as in the entire British army) and 1600 artillery pieces – enough for a significant military operation.

This does not mean, however, that Putin has taken a definite decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In the 2014 operation to seize Crimea, he showed that he and his military commanders understand Chinese strategist Sun Tzu’s dictum: “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”. What Putin does next will depend in part on what the West does to shape his risk calculation in the coming weeks.

There are three basic approaches that the West could take. The first is to lean on Zelenskyy to make concessions to Putin. A recent [article](#) by Samuel Charap of RAND argued that rather than focusing only on coercing Russia, the US should also try to put an end to the cycle of crises by pushing Kyiv to take steps toward implementing its obligations under the Minsk II agreement – the 2015 ceasefire agreement brokered by then French President François Hollande and then German Chancellor Angela Merkel when Ukrainian forces in the Donbas were on the point of being overrun. There seems to be some support for this approach in the Biden administration.

There are two problems with putting pressure on Ukraine to yield to Russia (apart from the moral aspects – which Charap acknowledges): the first is that when Putin demands that Ukraine fulfil Minsk II, he means Russia’s interpretation of it. That would require Ukraine to make the first move, taking steps that would put its security at greater risk, such as giving the *de facto* authorities in the Donbas a veto over Ukraine’s foreign policy orientation, including relations with the EU and NATO. In return, Ukraine could only hope that Russia would carry out its side of the bargain, and give back control of the Ukrainian border to the Ukrainian authorities. Ukraine has only to look at the example of Georgia to know how likely it is that Putin would do this: Russia has never carried out its obligations under the 2008 ceasefire deal negotiated by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The second problem is that Putin has already indicated that he wants more than simply the implementation of the Minsk agreement: he wants to end NATO co-

operation with Kyiv and stop the supply of Western equipment to Ukrainian forces, increasing Ukraine's future vulnerability. Each concession will merely become the basis for negotiating the next.

The second approach the West could take is to remain neutral, calling on both sides to show restraint. Until recently this was the approach of France and Germany: in April, as Russian forces near the Ukrainian border were reinforced, Berlin and Paris [called](#) on "all parties to exercise restraint and work toward the immediate de-escalation of tensions" – ignoring the fact that Russia was threatening Ukraine, not vice versa. Such even-handedness could encourage Putin to think that an attack would be essentially cost free, or that (as in the first scenario) the West would force Ukraine back to the negotiating table in the interests of restoring 'stability'.

Equally, Western refusal to take sides could result in Ukraine believing that it had no choice but to fight Russia on its own and assessing (wrongly) that its best hope of success would be a pre-emptive military offensive in the Donbas. Zelenskyy, a relatively weak and inexperienced president, might think he could defeat Russia's proxies before Russia could react, or hope that Ukraine's Western partners would have no choice but to help Kyiv if Russia counter-attacked. A similar scenario led to near-catastrophe for Georgia in 2008 when after years of Russian provocations the erratic Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, launched an attack on the breakaway region of South Ossetia in the hope of pushing the Russians out. Instead, the Russians captured all of South Ossetia and Georgia's other rebellious region, Abkhazia, and the West did nothing to help Georgia militarily.

The third approach the West could take is to focus on deterring Russia and reassuring Ukraine. This is by no means an easy option. The first challenge would be to convince Western opinion and the Kremlin that Ukraine is as important to the West as it is to Russia. Russian commentators have done a good job over many years in making the case that Ukraine is of existential importance to Moscow. But Ukraine's survival as an independent, democratic state is just as vital to the West, and especially to Europeans. If Russia sought to control eastern, central and southern Ukraine, leaving a land-locked, unstable western rump, the effects on European security would be profound – much greater than the annexation of Crimea. Refugee flows would destabilise Ukraine's western neighbours: Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Russia's dominance of the Black Sea would grow, leaving NATO allies Bulgaria and Romania more vulnerable. Russian forces would be several hundred kilometres closer to NATO territory. There would be consequences for the US too: Biden has repeatedly emphasised America's unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity – even though it is not a treaty ally. If the US stood by while Russia dismembered the country, it would further undermine Washington's reputation as a reliable partner, following its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The West has some economic leverage with Russia – though Russia's sovereign debt is low, major Russian corporations would be vulnerable to being shut out of Western debt markets. But comprehensive sanctions take a long time to be politically effective, while countries can adapt to limited sanctions or find ways to circumvent them. Western sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea and the shooting down of flight MH17 in 2014 are still in place and may have helped to restrain Putin from pushing further into Ukraine since then. Still, he may judge that broader economic sanctions would hurt the West as well as Russia, and would therefore be unrealistic or unsustainable for anything more than a very short period. Ending the purchase of oil and gas from Russia, for example, would have a major effect on the Russian economy; but no EU leader is going to suggest cutting off almost half of the EU's gas supplies and almost a quarter of its oil supplies, especially not during the current gas crisis with heating bills already spiking.

Western countries should accelerate the supply of defensive weapons systems to Ukraine. Ukraine's armed forces, though much stronger than in 2014, are still short of some key equipment including anti-tank and anti-aircraft systems. The US has supplied 47 launchers and 360 missiles for the Javelin anti-tank system, and Ukraine has bought 12 Bayraktar drones from Turkey. Ukraine's air defences depend entirely on Soviet-era equipment. But even if the West provides Ukraine with more defence systems, these would not have an instant effect on the balance of forces: it takes two or three training seasons to be fully competent with a Javelin, for example.

If Western nations want to deter Russia, the most effective step that they could take, but also the hardest politically, would be to deploy some Western forces near the front line, if requested by Ukraine. Britain's *Mirror* newspaper [reported](#) that 600 UK special forces were on standby to deploy to Ukraine. There has been no official confirmation of the story, nor similar stories from other Western countries. But it would be a credible response to the current situation. Putin has been reluctant to confront NATO member-states' forces directly. When the US killed around 200 Russian mercenaries in a battle in Syria, Putin did not escalate, but effectively disowned them. After Turkey shot down a Russian combat aircraft that strayed into Turkish airspace in 2015, Russia imposed sanctions, but did not retaliate militarily.

If Western countries did step up military support to Ukraine, it would be even more vital to keep open channels of communication to the Russian leadership (to the extent that they exist) to ensure that the West's intentions are understood. If countries chose to deploy forces to Ukraine, they should make clear to Russia that they were only there in pursuit of Ukraine's right to self-defence, in accordance with the UN Charter; and that if Russian deployments returned to normal peace-time levels, there would be no need for Western forces to be deployed in eastern Ukraine. At the same time, the West would need to emphasise to Zelenskyy that the deployment of Western forces was not intended to give him a blank cheque for military action, but to stabilise the situation and prevent conflict.

If Putin can achieve his objectives without having to risk open conflict, he will do so. If he thinks conflict is necessary, he will fight, unless he sees the likely cost as too high. The history of Putin's wars in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria suggests that he takes calculated risks – risks that his Western counterparts might not take – but he is not rash. Before he decides to send his forces across the Ukrainian border, NATO needs to show him that it would be rash indeed.

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