



CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

Russia-NATO Confrontation Over Ukraine¹

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Relations between Russia and the West are at their lowest point since 2014. Europe is at the brink of a serious military confrontation between Kyiv and Moscow and a deepening geopolitical and potentially military confrontation between Moscow and NATO. Unwanted escalation of conflicts that involve nuclear armed states is one of the most worrying scenarios for the Euro-Atlantic region today, and joint efforts to implement strategic risk reduction measures are needed to avert this threat.

American Perspective

Although Moscow has stated that differing perspectives on the fundamental tenets of Euro-Atlantic security are the main source of current West-Russia tensions, the American approach to the current situation centres around the specific issue of Ukraine. The US is prepared for diplomacy or military action: Washington will try to extend the diplomatic route, but the US government is very pessimistic as to its eventual success. There is a high level of alarm in Washington, and the American intelligence community seems to believe that there is a significant chance of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine.

Should Russia attack Ukraine, there are several ways that Washington could apply pressure in response. The US could implement further sanctions on Moscow, probably, by means of a large sanctions package that would be implemented all at once. The US could send further Western military systems to Ukraine. The Biden administration appears to have ruled out sending American troops to Ukraine but has no qualms about providing Kyiv with additional defensive equipment. A Russian attack would likely also lead to requests for additional NATO troops on the territories of Eastern European NATO member states, requests which the White House would likely answer. In fact, given recent developments, Washington does not appear to be waiting for an attack to take this latter step.

¹ This was the Contact Group's 14th meeting. The Group met virtually, with a distinguished US expert to provide an American perspective on the situation, as well as providing Russian, Ukrainian and European perspectives. This summary note was prepared by the European Leadership Network secretariat and does not necessarily represent the views of any individual Contact Group member or any member of the European Leadership Network.

Should the diplomatic route prevail, there are several areas included in Russia's draft proposals that could be negotiated. These areas could include a) the restoration of NATO-Russia channels, b) limits or a ban on intermediate-range weapons in Europe, c) constraints on the size and scope of military activities, and d) enhanced risk-reduction activities. There are several Russian areas of concern which appear to be non-starters for the US, however, including a) NATO forswearing further enlargement, b) NATO withdrawing military forces from the territory of allies that joined after 1997, c) NATO agreeing to not hold exercises in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and d) NATO countries not positioning nuclear weapons on the territory of other states – assuming no Russian concessions on non-strategic nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the US does believe that there is room for negotiation, should Russia agree to come to the table with the knowledge that not all of its demands will be met.

Russian Perspective

Contact Group members noted that Russian perspectives differ significantly from Western ones. In Western countries, the crisis is perceived as being over Ukraine, but in Moscow, broader issues with the European security architecture are seen as the cause. Ukraine is indeed an important part of the problem, but it is a symptom rather than a cause.

Overall, Russian interests have remained consistent since the 1990s. Russia has always been against NATO enlargement and has always wanted a “seat at the table” in any discussions on European security. Since the Gorbachev era, Russia has desired an “inclusive” security architecture; one that could be, for example, centred on the OSCE. If this goal is unattainable, Moscow would at least want some sort of “buffer” between Russia and NATO. Recent Russian demands repeat these desires, albeit more bluntly.

The current urgency of the situation comes from Russia's leadership, but the idea that “something dramatic” should happen to “reset the table” has been circulating in Moscow foreign policy elite circles for some time. Russia has managed to accomplish this goal to some degree through its military exercises, which have captured and held Washington's attention. Russia takes US President Joe Biden seriously as a negotiator; the length of meetings between the Putin administration and the Biden administration is one indicator of serious engagement. Meanwhile, in participants' views, if individual European states want to negotiate with Moscow, they need to bring some positive solutions to the table.

While the situation is indeed urgent, fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine are overblown by the media. There is no guarantee that a catastrophe will not occur, but an invasion of Ukraine does not make sense from a Russian perspective: Russia would suffer a lot; as would Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia does not want Ukrainian territory; Moscow does not really know what it would do with it. Public opinion polls show that many Russians believe war is inevitable; however, they also show that record numbers of Russians are very afraid of such a possibility.

There are areas in which Russia and NATO can negotiate, and it is premature to assume that there will not be any diplomatic progress. NATO has made demands that they know Russia will not consider, but they make these demands nonetheless out of principle. The same might be true regarding Russia – Moscow does not necessarily think that the West will sign the Russian draft documents, but they introduce them anyway. There is a way out of this without a catastrophe, and maybe, important issues like arms control, limits on deployment, etc. can be addressed in the process.

Ukrainian Perspective

While the current situation is obviously extremely tense, this is nothing new for Ukraine: For Ukrainians, this war started in 2014, when Russia occupied Ukrainian territory. Additionally, Russia's current encirclement of Ukraine began in March of last year, not just over the past few weeks. A main perception is that Russia aims to damage Ukraine's economy, to provoke internal conflict and to destabilize Ukraine's currency, as well as to pressure and blackmail the West more broadly. These goals are carried out by concentrating Russian troops on Ukraine's borders, engaging in cyberattacks, and attempting to destabilise Ukraine's international political situation.

Russia has many areas of influence over Ukraine that it can leverage. For one, Moscow knows that Ukraine needs access to international financial markets, so by creating instability in the Ukrainian economy through its destabilisation of internal politics and expansion of its military coercion, it becomes more difficult for Ukraine to penetrate international financial markets. Additionally, Russia tries to play the "Ukrainian card" with the US leadership in an attempt to keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence, even though a majority of Ukrainians support Euro-Atlantic integration, including the current Zelensky administration.

Over the last several weeks, Ukraine has witnessed many provocations from Russian media outlets. However, Ukraine is not the aggressor here; it is trying to defend its territory, build a Western-style market economy and develop democracy. While Ukraine appreciates the support of the British and American governments, there is some disappointment regarding some European governments and institutions, which Kyiv feels have failed adequately to show their support for Ukraine. This iteration of the conflict will serve as a litmus test to see who in Europe supports Ukraine and who in Europe tends to be more influenced by Russia.

European Perspective

During the crisis, much has been made of an apparent lack of European unity on how to move forward. But there are also many ways in which European countries have shown agreement. Some of those points of agreement are:

- Europe wants to support Ukraine.
- Europe does not want to go to war.
- A response to a Russian attack should be sanctions.

What makes these points of agreement – and others – noteworthy is that there are few good options. Most measures that would be taken against Russia in response to any potential military invasion of Ukraine would almost certainly negatively affect Europe as well. But most European countries are united on these issues, nevertheless.

A common perspective is that a main Russian motive in the crisis is to identify areas of disunity in the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Thus, Europe must work to maintain a unified message. European countries also do not understand why Russia chose this moment to pressure Ukraine: after all, it was clear that Ukraine would not become a NATO member state soon, if ever. Given this background, there are several ways that the situation could be de-escalated productively:

1. Renew discussions on arms control.
2. Begin a substantial and productive dialogue on European security. The dialogue could be carried out by a body such as the OSCE and should address difficult questions, such as:
 - a. How do parties see the state of the European security architecture given current circumstances?
 - b. What does it mean that we should not strengthen our security at the expense of others?
3. Further work should be done in the Normandy Group.

Russia has tried to frame the issue in binary terms: either all parties agree to all issues or there will be war. But Europe can try for a third option, which may be more attractive to everyone.