Simmering tensions have exploded into direct combat between Russia and Ukraine and have left the world in shock. For the Contact Group, these developments have been especially emotional, given that many members are from one of the two countries, have close friends and relatives there, and/or have dedicated their careers to improving relations with the region. Thursday’s Contact Group meeting was mainly dedicated to two aspects of the crisis – the prospects for diplomacy and the purposes and efficacy of sanctions.

Diplomacy

Most participants in the meeting were at least somewhat pessimistic about diplomacy. Given the unprecedented level of military escalation over the last few days, vast differences in goals, and general global shock, Contact Group members tended to doubt that initial efforts toward diplomacy would be successful. Levels of pessimism, however, did vary.

Very pessimistic about diplomacy: Some members were very pessimistic at the prospect of an imminent diplomatic solution. They struggled to find any signs that a diplomatic pathway would even be possible given the current circumstances. One member had a “grim take” on diplomacy, as they did not see that the Russian side was at all interested in a diplomatic solution, preferring instead to use any time that could be dedicated to diplomatic negotiations on military moves. They also posited that even with harsh sanctions, the Kremlin would likely not change its position in any meaningful sense. It was said that if the Russian elites become split over the war, that might create an opening for dialogue, but this is extremely hard to predict.

A couple of other Contact Group members stated that they believed that diplomacy would eventually become possible, but not in the current situation in which Russia is actively sending missiles
to hit civilian targets in Ukraine. One member stated that “there’s always time for diplomacy. But first, the perpetrator has to stop its crimes and atrocities. ... This isn’t just bad faith; it’s just barbarism and state terrorism.” Another member agreed, saying that “negotiations with a gun to your temple have no good prospects.” Negotiations would do nothing at this point, given a) the military situation and b) the fact that Putin’s stated demands are “ridiculous” and essentially call for the full capitulation of Ukraine.

Finally, two participants flatly stated that there is no hope for diplomacy at the moment. One member argued that “diplomacy is kind of a dead-end right now.” Another member said, “almost no other leader has done more for diplomacy than [French President] Emmanuel Macron”, but even Macron “has no hopes for the moment,” because, in the readout of their latest call, Putin made it clear that no compromises are possible until the goals of the operation are met. A third participant complained that there have been “three months of talks” to try to make sure that a Russian invasion does not happen – and everything has turned out to be “just smoke and mirrors.” Given the massive efforts taken by the parties on the other side of the negotiating table from Russia and the fact that the conflict appears to have rendered it all meaningless, it is easy to see how a diplomatic solution can seem far out of reach at this point.

Room for diplomacy: Some members, however, expressed their beliefs that diplomacy was possible under certain circumstances. One member pointed out the massive financial toll that continued Russian intervention would take on Russia itself, especially given the fact that sanctions have drastically shrunk Russia’s access to foreign reserves. In this member’s mind, “if diplomacy doesn’t happen, Russia will face destruction in a way that they haven’t seen for a long time.” They also argued that some positive signals have been observed; in one member’s view, Russia has gradually been ratcheting down their demands and may at some point be amenable to a compromise – especially if sanctions force the Russian economy into absolute freefall.

Additionally, some members emphasised the view that “diplomacy comes from the battlefield”. So far, Russian forces have proven extraordinarily weak and unable to secure substantial military advances. Troops are very demotivated, and military logistics have proven abysmal. Russian soldiers are reportedly dying in droves. In addition to economic aspects, these factors could drive Russia to the negotiating table as well. Nonetheless, a Ukrainian participant noted that there was very little in Russia’s demands that would be acceptable to Ukraine – apart from perhaps Ukrainian neutrality. However, even that would likely have to be preceded by a ceasefire and tied to EU membership and the nature of any ceasefire would have to be discussed as well. Even if a ceasefire is put in place now, what if Russia regroups and returns in the summer? Additionally, as each day passes, Russia will look weaker and will have to sacrifice more – how can the process be sped up so that a compromise can be made? Difficult questions such as these were raised during the meeting.

Finally, others looked at Russian official positions. Sergey Lavrov and other officials have indicated in interviews that Russia does not want to be completely isolated. But any diplomacy will be on new terms – Russia’s demands are very high, and if they were accepted, it would essentially create a whole new European security order from a position of force, creating an unacceptable precedent. Another member argued simply that the West has to “make Russia ready for diplomacy” by using a wide range of tools to try and change Putin’s calculus.
Sanctions

Views on the purposes and efficacy of sanctions varied. It was said that the present sanctions are not aimed at changing Russia’s behaviour or calculus; instead, they are meant as punishment for Russia’s recent actions. This is, apart from Iran, unprecedented against a major global economy – disconnecting Russian banks from SWIFT, sanctioning the Russian Central Bank, full blocking sanctions on a few banks, etc. These actions will have major ramifications for Russia’s economy and will hit not just oligarchs, but ordinary citizens too. Sanctions are also intended as a warning to others: rumours abounded, for example, that China would attempt a similar push against Taiwan.

There was discussion about the possibility of including “off-ramps” in sanctions policy that would provide Russia with a clear pathway to ease sanctions in return for leaving Ukraine. Some argued that Russia has committed to its current path and has shown little likelihood of diverging from it before its military objectives have been achieved. Furthermore, a Ukrainian participant said it would be important not to offer to lift sanctions simply in return for Russian withdrawal, as there would be no guarantee that it did not simply regroup forces, rearm and invade again. In addition, the Russian military has inflicted extensive damage on Ukraine, and those costs would have to be factored into any policy.

The group also discussed factors that could limit the effectiveness of sanctions. A key question was whether sanctions would serve as an inciting factor for Russia to completely divorce itself from the West and go its own way. The Russian leadership has been moving in this direction for decades as it is. Other Russian elites will also potentially be emboldened by harsh sanctions; the siloviki (elites with backgrounds in Russia’s security services), for example, may see the West’s harsh response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine as a justification for their fears that Russia is “besieged” by a West that was only looking for a pretext to bring it to its knees. Russia would thus, in the mind of one member, “return to the 1920s and 1930s”, where it essentially acted as a “lone wolf.” Some also argued that many Russians who lived through the Soviet period are used to poverty, and the possibility of being poor will likely not drive many Russians out onto the streets, especially given the repression of anti-war protestors.

Nonetheless, others had different views. For one, the siloviki only make up one part of Russia’s elite. There are many in Russian elite circles and society at large that see great danger in sanctions, especially those involved in business. Currently, Russia is very close to default and is quickly moving toward a 1998 or 1991 situation regarding the economy. There will undoubtedly be influential figures that will be dismayed, to say the least, by the current situation. Members mentioned Oleg Deripaska and Roman Abramovich as two business leaders who have at least shown some willingness to act outside strict Kremlin guidelines. There could then be room for negotiation and diplomacy with certain areas of the Russian elite, and a Ukrainian member emphasised an interest in talking to nongovernmental Russians who could still envision a cooperative and respectful future with their neighbours.

For Russia’s sake, some members believe that negotiations must happen: after all, if diplomacy dies, Russia “will face destruction in a way that they haven’t seen for a long time.” Additionally, it was said that Russia will not be able to financially support this war, much less turn it into a victory.

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