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Russia's "total confrontation" on the Eastern flank

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For the second time in less than a year, Russian troops have gathered on Ukraine's border in alarming numbers raising concerns of a possible invasion. In the meantime, Russia is posing conditions that are unacceptable to the West. Unless NATO, allies and Partners respond appropriately, the chain of events that Russia has initiated could inadvertently trigger a conventional war between Ukraine and Russia. If this were to happen, there is the real risk that some allies could be drawn into the conflict. This underscores the need for the Alliance, in tandem with the EU, national governments, and the private sector, to deepen cooperation and respond in a timely, unified and coordinated fashion. At the same time, it is more important than ever that NATO, allies, and Partners understand Russia's intentions. This raises the need for a return to regular and sustained dialogue with Russia. The right response for NATO will depend on changing circumstances – namely Russia's actions, the progress of diplomacy, and the Alliance's collective will to support Ukraine.

Multi-sphere confrontation

At a time when the US, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are engaged in talks with Russia, a humanitarian crisis is still unfolding in Belarus with migrants confined to camps and inaccessible to international aid. Meanwhile, Russia continues to push for the final green light on Nord Stream 2 (NS2) when Europe is facing a natural gas shortage and exorbitant energy prices. Further raising energy concerns, Belarus President Lukashenko has threatened to cut gas supplies to Europe through the Yamal pipeline. These events may seem disjointed,

but their timing and execution point to a coordinated, multi-sphere – military, economic, informational, and societal – operation resembling what Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov has described as "total confrontation".¹

The campaign appears to have both foreign and domestic objectives. The first is to discourage western backing for Ukraine while the second is to exert greater influence over Kyiv and events on the ground in Ukraine. Likewise, Moscow aims to raise support for Nord Stream 2 with the newly-formed German government and strengthen its negotiating hand with the transatlantic community. There is also a domestic dimension for Russia. Military mobilization serves as a distraction from ongoing economic and social malaise at a time when Putin's favourability rate is at its lowest since the 2014 Russia-Ukraine crisis. This suggests that Moscow does not intend to invade Ukraine, in a conventional sense, at least for now. If Moscow acts, which is still uncertain, it will probably resemble an asymmetric incursion. Thus, the military build-up serves both the Kremlin's foreign (defensive and economic negotiations) and domestic (public support for government) interests.

Keywords

Russia
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Connecting the dots

In attempting to understand the links between past events, historians may look to the sequence for insights. Drawing on this approach, we identify the potential sources of Russia's current and future conduct, not

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1 Author's translation from V. Khudoleev, "Voennaya nauka smotrit v budushcheye", *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 26 March 2018.

only concerning Ukraine but throughout the Eastern flank. Other considerations figuring into this analysis consist of the Russian conception of modern military conflict, the Kremlin's own domestic security worries, and the worldview of Russia's leaders. When considering these factors and the timing of key incidents, a picture emerges from what may at first appear to be disparate events. The following map highlights recent developments.

and support for Ukraine, particularly military support that could tip the scales of conflict in the Donbas to Kyiv's favour.

Looking back to 2014 the signing of the EU association agreement with Ukraine is what many believe to have triggered Russian involvement in Ukraine's affairs. Thus, the signing of any agreement between Ukraine and NATO has the potential to be a mech-



Source: Map produced by NATO HQ, SITCEN Geopolitical Section, December 2021. Illustrations inserted by the author.

Beginning in the summer 2020, Ukraine and NATO agreed to deepen cooperation within the framework of an Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP), which will provide “tailor-made opportunities [...], enhanced access to interoperability programmes and exercises, and more sharing of information, including lessons learned”.² Shortly thereafter, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky adopted a new National Security Strategy highlighting the EOP “with the aim of membership in NATO”.³ In response (and ever since Russia's annexation of Crimea), the message from Moscow regarding Ukraine has been consistently aggressive, discouraging any talk of Ukrainian NATO membership

anism for Russian escalation whether it be diplomatic, military, or otherwise. In addition to EOP, Ukraine has received financial, military, and in-kind support from individual NATO member states, notably the US, UK, France, and Turkey. The inauguration of US president Biden who, in response to election tampering and cyber-attacks, imposed new sanctions against Russia, was another important milestone given Russian views of NATO as an extension of US power.

Clarifying the red lines

Ever since NATO and Ukraine launched EOP, Russia has expanded its military posture (through a heightened, continuous, air and naval presence) culminating in the first military build-up on the Ukrainian border in

² “NATO recognises Ukraine as enhanced opportunities partner”, NATO, 12 June 2020.

³ “Relations with Ukraine”, NATO, 6 January 2022.

the spring of 2021. After a unified international rebuke, Russia partially withdrew armed forces from the border region but maintained supplies with a larger troop presence. Then in April 2021 Putin made his initial “red lines” announcement as a warning to the West.⁴ When viewed through the lens of events in 2020-21, it appears that the “red lines” represent any external support that could either: tip the ongoing conflict in Ukraine to -Kyiv’s favour; or drive Ukraine’s political or economic orientation away from Russia.

Since Putin’s 2021 “red lines” speech, NATO support of Ukraine through the EOP programme has endured and individual NATO allies have continued to provide their own support. In addition to US military aid, in the form of Javelin missiles, command launch units, patrol boats, and maintenance equipment, the UK and Ukraine signed an agreement in June 2021 for the sale of minehunters and the construction of a new naval port for the Ukrainian navy.⁵ The signing took place onboard the British destroyer, HMS Defender, which later may have come under Russian fire while crossing into disputed waters near Crimea.

Soon afterwards, Ukraine took delivery of the first batch of Turkish drones as part of a defence cooperation agreement that included the purchase of Bayraktar TB2 drones, Turkish Ada-class corvettes, and an aerospace technology development.⁶ In terms of timing, what appears to have triggered the most recent Russian military build-up is Ukraine’s use of the TB2 drones against Russian-backed separatists in October. Shortly after the strike, Foreign Minister S. Lavrov passionately denounced the strike which was followed by a surge in Russia’s military presence on the Ukrainian border. The significance of the drone strike is a potential game changer in the slow-burn Donbas conflict because the TB2 creates a competitive advantage for the Ukrainian military against separatists. It also strikes a sensitive nerve for Moscow given Russian military strategists traditionally regard precision strike weapons with great importance.⁷

Domestic factors

Russia’s actions may also be a response to domestic pressures. In recent years, Russia’s GDP has plateaued. Despite the Kremlin’s best efforts, including the nomination of the economist Mikhail Mishustin as prime

minister, the economy is riddled with inflation. Moreover, citizens have had to bear the brunt of cuts in social spending for the government’s continued funding of military expansion, the development of Crimea, and conflict territories under de facto Russian control (i.e. Donbas, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia). Considering the growing crackdown on protests, journalists, and political opposition, it is clear that Russian leadership is concerned about social discontent. The latest uprising in Kazakhstan where problems mirror those of Russia (increased inequality, economic stagnation, inflation, and corruption) would also raise alarm in the Kremlin.

The signing of any agreement between Ukraine and NATO has the potential to be a mechanism for Russian escalation

What is more, Putin’s approval rating is hovering between 60-70 percent with a downward trajectory. While such rates may not seem worrisome for western politicians, it is unusual for the Russian president in his more than two decades in office. Every time public approval dropped to this level, Moscow has engaged in some sort of regional conflict (the Second Chechen War in 1999, gas disputes with Ukraine in 2005 following the Orange Revolution and again in 2010, Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Russia-Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea in 2014). After each of these conflicts, Putin’s approval rating rose, and the government enjoyed a respite from public scrutiny.⁸ Although the Russo-Georgian war took place when Putin’s approval hovered around 80 percent, the war further enhanced Putin’s popularity, which was only broken by the economic impact of the 2008 financial crisis. This bump in ratings is a type of “rally round the flag” effect, and if past is an indicator of Putin’s current calculus, then raising fears about NATO encroachment, a familiar narrative to most Russians, could provide a distraction from Russia’s internal problems.

Another domestic factor is the price of oil and how this influences Russia’s perceived self-confidence. As one influential study by Virginia Tech researcher, M. Snegovaya, has illustrated, a rise in the price of oil has a statistically significant relationship with Russia’s foreign policy stance – the higher the oil price rose, the more aggressive Russian policy rhetoric became.⁹ Given that Russia’s break-even oil price is about USD 40 per barrel, rising oil prices that are currently at USD 86 would point to a more aggressive foreign policy and military posture.

4 “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”, Office of the President, 21 April 2021.

5 “UK signs agreement to support enhancement of Ukrainian naval capabilities”, UK Ministry of Defence, 23 June 2021.

6 B. E. Bekdil, “Ukraine is set to buy 24 Turkish drones. So why hasn’t Russia pushed back?”, *Defense News*, 29 September 2021.

7 Good example of Russian military literature on the subject is V. Slipchenko, *Voina Budyshego: Sbestorye Pokolenie*, Gran-pess, Moscow, 2001.

8 “Indicators”, Levada Center, 5 January 2022.

9 M. Snegovaya, “What factors contribute to the aggressive foreign policy of Russian leaders?”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol.67, Iss.1, 2019.

Renewed dialogue

The militarization of Ukraine's border region looks to be the new normal, which will bring greater scrutiny on any military aid to Ukraine, either from NATO or individual allies. Short of a military response, options for the West include exerting different types of pressure to de-escalate the situation through diplomacy, and the prospect of deeper economic pain and international isolation. Whereas western sanctions in response to 2014 have stunted economic growth, there are still economic “nuclear” options, such as access to the international banking system, that would cripple the Russian economy. President Biden, after consulting with European allies, hinted that the US would impose sanctions “like none [Putin] has ever seen before” in addition to a surge in the American military presence in Eastern Europe.¹⁰ While Biden's crisis diplomacy has evoked a list of outlandish Russian demands, including a substantial withdrawal of NATO infrastructure and personnel from Eastern Europe, it is just the first phase of negotiations. The fact that Russia has articulated any demands and agreed to participate in high-level talks represents the first movement in dialogue with NATO of any kind since 2019. In terms of diplomatic strategy, this resembles a sort of “anchoring” phase when demands are typically inflated in order to allow for concessions in the negotiations process.

Recalling that Moscow's military build-up is responding to both external and internal security fears, its diplomatic posturing is probably a two-level negotiation. When Putin presented his red-line demands, he was likely speaking to a domestic audience – stoking historical grievances to raise public support. If the dialogue process is productive, one can expect the messaging for both foreign interlocutors and the domestic audience to become aligned. Pending on Russia's response to the points that allies raise in initial meetings, it will be important for allied diplomats and NATO representatives to keep this in mind when setting expectations, meeting agendas, and building a long-term strategy.

A renewed commitment to dialogue with Russia may require rethinking the format for direct talks, one that combines bilateral talks with a complementary multilat-

eral platform to overcome the previous deadlock in the NATO-Russia Council. The January 12 meeting was an opening step to re-establish communication. Other avenues of dialogue, such as Track 2/1.5 comprising working groups and scientific meetings, could lay the foundation for a return to regular meetings of the NATO-Russia Council or some other format. These can buy time to allow for a more substantive solution to emerge and for allies to implement confidence building measures and stability mechanisms. This will make the militarization of the Russia-Ukraine border, what appears to be the new normal, less risky over time.

Few options

After the first Russian military build-up in April 2020, NATO joined its allies and the EU in denouncing the Russia's actions. This, combined with the spectre of further sanctions, motivated Russia's first troop withdrawal from Ukraine's border over the summer 2021. This is not to suggest that the same combination of pressures will work in the future. Russia's military, economic and diplomatic pressure have grown in scale progressively since 2014.

For NATO, the Russian military upsurge means that continued EOP cooperation with Ukraine will present new challenges. Even if Moscow scales down its military presence, the troop surge is a new lever of pressure that Russia can use to deter support to its neighbour, and create heightened tension. While the Russian military build-up does not mean that an invasion is inevitable, it does raise the risk of a crisis that Russia could use as a pretext for an invasion.

In doing so, Russia's actions have forced a reckoning. The impasse over Ukraine and disparate worldviews between Russia and the West look to be increasingly unsustainable. NATO will have to respond to crisis after crisis with each iteration becoming more severe. If the current trajectory can be changed, then it will require not only the right mix of policies – in the form of deterrence and defence – but also a more sophisticated brand of diplomacy, one that entails regular dialogue.

¹⁰ K. Liptak, “Biden says US troops in Ukraine are off the table but promises withering sanctions if Russia invades”, CNN, 8 December 2021.



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