



## Ukraine, Russia, and the West

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Having used brutal force to crush nationwide demonstrations in support of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny, President Vladimir Putin has now embarked on a new venture. By mobilizing a huge number of Russian forces at the eastern borders of Ukraine and in the annexed Crimea, he is refueling a conflict that has been simmering since 2014. Or is it all for show?

Widely shared footage has shown vast numbers of Russian trucks and trains laden with tons of military equipment, tanks, howitzers, and weapons flowing toward the conflict zones in the Donbas and the Crimean Peninsula.

On April 6, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby asked Russia to clarify its intentions regarding the massive military buildup. He received no answer. “All sides need to abide by the 2014-2015 Minsk [agreements](#) on the Ukraine conflict with Russia-aligned rebels,” he said, “to bring the temperature down and to de-escalate.” But tensions only rose as the US pledged unwavering support to Ukraine.

Only on April 13 did Russian DM Sergei Shoigu finally state that the [buildup](#) was part of military maneuvers, would last another two weeks, and was a response to the US and NATO beefing up their forces near Russia’s borders.

Ukrainian FM Dmytri Kuleba told the BBC, “We do not need war.” Neither does NATO. But the growing military build-up and drills, now also conducted by Ukraine, signal the failure of Moscow and Kyiv to move toward lasting peace. Naturally, Ukraine and Russia blame each other for provoking the new tensions.

There now appears to exist a new Cold War between Russia and the West—one that could turn hot. According to independent Russian military analyst Pavel

Felgenhauer, "This crisis has the potential to [escalate](#) into a pan-European or world war."

Felgenhauer notes that at least 4,000 new Russian troops have been brought to the Eastern Ukrainian [border](#) and warns that war could break out within a month. He points out that on May 9, Russia will be in a patriotic mood, as it will be celebrating the USSR's 1945 victory over Nazi Germany. He does not say war with Ukraine is inevitable—rather that "it would take a psychoanalyst to figure out Putin's real intentions."

The deputy chief of Putin's administration, Dmitri Kozak, has warned, "If Ukraine initiates a flareup and there is a massacre, we [Russia] will be forced to intervene," a [scenario](#) he threatened would be "the beginning of the end of Ukraine." He later added that it would be "a shot not in the leg, but in the face."

That said, a "source close to the Kremlin" told Reuters, "...the military buildup is not a sign of major escalation in the contest. Russia is doing it openly...deliberately uncovering tanks in the day[time]," implying it is mainly a show of force. Should this person be believed?

Meanwhile, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy has [called desperately](#) on NATO to lay out a path for Ukraine to join the alliance. As he sees it, NATO membership is the only way to prevent war in Donbas. He is said to have told NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg that a Ukrainian Membership Action Plan [MAP] would be a critical signal to Russia that NATO and America mean business.

Because the situation in Ukraine involves Russian troop movements, US European Command (EUCOM) has raised the threat level in Europe to "potential imminent crisis"—the highest level.

How did we come to this pass? Ukraine, like much smaller Belarus, is a neutral nation that serves as a buffer between Russia and the West. In 2013-14, an anti-Russian revolution prevailed in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, overthrowing the grossly corrupt pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich. Yanukovich was known for his anti-Western and anti-EU positions.

The turning point came when Yanukovich first supported and then voided an economic association agreement between Ukraine and the EU, insisting instead on one with Russia's Eurasian Union. Ukrainians, particularly those geographically and culturally close to the West, preferred the EU.

Thereafter, pro-EU protests broke out in the capital city's *maidan* (public square). The "Euromaidan" protests led to armed struggle and revolution. Fearing for his life, Yanukovich fled to Russia, and Ukraine elected a pro-Western government under Petro Poroshenko.

Putin's response was to covertly insert masked and armed "little green men", Russian troops without uniform insignia, into Ukraine's strategic Crimean peninsula in a bloodless takeover. The majority of the Crimean population is Russian, and Moscow subsequently annexed Crimea—home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Putin then started trying to carve chunks out of eastern Ukraine using Russian separatists and mercenaries as well as the regular army.

Since the beginning of the conflict in April 2014, there have been twists, turns, and ceasefires. Yet even as they were negotiating, both the new Kyiv government and Moscow were actively seeking and preparing to claim disputed territory.

In 2015, the negotiated Minsk-II agreement stopped the "active phase" of the conflict. But while neither side has attempted to capture more territory since then, a real peace has never been reached.

Large portions of Ukraine's Donbas region are still controlled by what became the Moscow-backed self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic. Over the past eight years, violence has killed nearly 14,000 people and injured more than 24,000.

The huge military build-up being conducted right now by Russia flouts the most recent Russian and Ukrainian agreement of 2019 with regard to "full and comprehensive implementation" of a negotiated truce among Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Russia's paranoia about its border is longstanding. Putin has always feared the march of NATO toward Russian territory, and is unhappy that the Ukraine chose to align economically with the EU rather than with the Eurasian union.

On April 1, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held a phone conversation with his Ukrainian counterpart, DM Andrei Saran, in which he "reaffirmed unwavering US support for Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

Yet, as Ukrainian philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko wrote in an October 30, 2018 [article](#), "How Realistic are Ukraine's Chances of NATO Membership?", member states, not just the US, must approve new members. To join NATO, a country must institute reforms and meet certain [requirements](#), including cleaning up corruption (a continuing problem with Ukraine).

Ukraine's chances of joining the EU are better today than they were in 2018. It has moved closer to Europe and is now a "priority partner." Many EU [programs](#)—financial, technical, security, OSCE monitoring, and others—are in place to help Ukraine.

Putin must be given a clear Western red line on the escalation of military conflict in Ukraine, and that will not be easy. Sanctions on Putin's key project, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, are not sufficient. The pipeline is almost completed. Nord Stream 2's major insurer has [announced](#) plans to exit the project, and Nord Stream 2 has [announced](#) a halt to construction.

### **What about Biden's sanctions?**

President Biden called Putin on April 13 and proposed a [summit](#) to discuss a number of issues, including Ukraine. The Kremlin replied a day later that further discussion of a meeting in a European country would "only be possible taking into account an analysis of the actual situation and further steps from our counterparts," meaning that "holding such a meeting was contingent on Washington's future behavior, in what looked like a [thinly veiled reference](#) to potential US sanctions."

In view of the new Cold War environment and fears of Russian calls to arms in Ukraine, the Biden administration imposed significant sanctions on Russia on April 15. The sanctions target Moscow's militarized economy.

Specifically, the Kremlin is being punished for a cyber-espionage campaign against the US and efforts to influence the US presidential election. The administration [sanctioned](#) six Russian companies that support Russian spy services' cyber-hacking operations. It also intends to expel 10 officials from the Russian embassy in Washington, most of whom have been identified as intelligence officers working under diplomatic cover. American economic might could also be used in a positive way if there is real change in Moscow, but so far, this is not the case.

The West needs to come to a decision. As Mike Sweeney noted, there is an [imbalance of interests](#) between Russia and the West over Ukraine. To NATO, Ukraine is "a policy option for the United States; for Russia, it seems like an existential threat" that Moscow will not easily brook. America has no vital national interest in Ukraine except the prevention of conflict from spilling over into other European countries—above all Poland and the Baltic states, which are all NATO members.

Putin must be given clear signals by the West on NATO's concerns about military conflict with Russia in Ukraine. Among such signals are the scheduled 2021 NATO military drills with Ukraine planned for this summer, which are to involve more than 1,000 personnel from five NATO member states.

The West must also come to grips with the fact that Putin mobilized his forces largely to prevent NATO membership for Ukraine. He may be using the military build-up to intimidate the parties prior to negotiation.

Ukraine is a victim of its geography. It shares a 1,200 mile-border with Russia that is hard to defend on either side. Whatever it might hope for, Kyiv cannot fully escape Moscow's geopolitical reach.

### **A different approach**

The Gordian knot of never-ending military conflict over Ukraine must be cut. Rather than making Ukraine a NATO member, the West should, while strongly countering Russian military build-ups and espionage, seek a geopolitical compromise: neutral status for Ukraine. While this will not be easy, the West can promote a kind of Swiss neutrality model combined with an Austrian one for Ukraine. The US could also declare outright that Ukraine will never become a member of NATO.

However, Russia must compromise as well. If Moscow wants to prevent NATO extension to Ukraine, it has to be ready to lay down its arms with regard to eastern Ukraine. In return for the concession on NATO membership, Russia must declare respect for Ukrainian territorial integrity and withdraw all its forces from eastern Ukraine.

A perpetual neutrality treaty must be based on strong deterrence and well-trained, well-equipped, and professional armed forces. Perhaps, as in Switzerland, there should also be a dispersed militia with weapons kept at home. Clearly, the West will have to continue to arm Ukraine with defensive weapons like anti-tank Javelins. The army's budget will have to be increased and supported by Ukraine's own impressive defense industry.

An international treaty between the Great Powers (Russia, the US, and the EU) could be modeled after the agreement the Austrians negotiated in 1955, which provided for the withdrawal of Russian forces without permitting Kremlin interference in Austrian internal affairs. In Finland, Russian interference was permitted. This should not be allowed in the Ukrainian case.

Closer ties between a neutral Ukraine and the EU must also be tolerated by Moscow. A special clause for the autonomy of the Donbas could be included in the final "Swiss-Austrian" neutrality treaty, supportive of economic and cultural intercourse between Russia and the Donbas.

One thing is certain: Moscow will not give up Sevastopol, the Crimean home of its Black Sea Fleet, which links Russia to the Middle East. The invasion of Crimea was not just retaliation for the revolution in Kyiv but a long-planned measure to ensure the continued use of this port, a traditional site of the Russian fleet.

In future negotiations, the US could treat Crimea as it did the Baltics after the Soviet "liberation" in 1945. The US did not recognize the Russian annexation until the Balts

regained their independence in 1991. Ukraine and Russia might also agree on confidence-building measures involving economic cooperation.

It is unlikely that Russia will tolerate Ukrainian membership in NATO without some kind of dangerous counter-reaction, whether overt or covert. The West will have to induce Moscow to compromise on a well-balanced proposal for Ukrainian neutrality and stick to it while ensuring that negotiations preempt dangerous confrontation with Russia.

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