



Russia Pressures Ukraine, to Little Avail

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: What Moscow is after with its renewed military pressure on Kyiv is unclear, but the long-term ramifications are discernible. With each passing year, it becomes more and more costly for Russia to undermine Ukraine's efforts to build more effective military forces and a stronger economy.

Ukraine is once again a focus of Russia's foreign policy. Many theories have been put forward to explain Moscow's massive concentration of military forces along the Ukraine border: it is preparing for invasion, it is testing the Biden administration, and so on.

It is unclear why Russia should have mounted a major offensive at this particular moment. Moscow has been consistently strategic in its thinking about military actions since 2008. It has always pursued a concrete military objective: prevention of NATO expansion to Georgia (2008) and protection of its military bases in Crimea (2014) and in Syria (2015).

It is also hard to discern the much touted correlation between Putin's pursuit of internal popularity and his foreign adventures. His actions seem to be based on a purely geopolitical calculus. Why should Moscow wage even a limited war against Ukraine right now? What concrete, tangible objectives could it achieve?

There were more immediate reasons for the troop build-up on the border than the achievement of broad strategic goals. Those reasons include clashes between Russian-backed separatist rebels and Ukrainian troops in the east of the country, about which the deputy head of Russia's presidential administration, Dmitry Kozak, said Russian forces could intervene to "defend" Russian citizens. Another reason for the build-up could be to force Kyiv to resume water supplies to the Crimean peninsula, which is believed to be

suffering a shortage. While it would be a mistake to discount the possibility of actual war breaking out, even under those circumstances Russia would be looking for a limited escalation that might provide it with a pretext to upgrade diplomatic ties with the separatist republics.

Russia benefits here from its tradition of obfuscation. The whole maneuver was likely nothing more than a means of seeding doubt in the enemy about its capabilities. And in a way, it worked. For Moscow, chaos abroad provides opportunities, as it shifts attention from more pressing internal affairs to external issues.

Capitalizing on opacity along its borders is a uniquely Russian foreign policy tool. It amounts very nearly to grand strategic thinking: how to reap benefits from crises in neighboring countries. Take Armenia, Belarus, or Kyrgyzstan. Those allied states fear Russia but also depend on it exclusively, which makes geopolitical extraction much easier for Moscow.

Ukraine is a different story. The fomenting of instability in that country is aimed not at growing its dependency on Moscow but at derailing its internal development. A centralized, militarily and economically powerful Ukraine would be a very serious long-term problem for Moscow.

The war scare is likely fading, but it showed how quickly Russia can amass its troops and invade chunks of Ukraine. It also illustrated that there are many pressure points where Moscow can raise the heat and gain momentum.

Of course, not all goes according to plan in actions of this kind. It remains doubtful that Russia gained anything tangible. On the contrary: the world was reminded how troublesome Russian activities are in and around Ukraine, and Kyiv garnered sympathy across broader political classes and among the general populations of Europe and the US.

Inadvertently, Russia's actions pushed Europe and the US into seeking to mend troubled transAtlantic ties. Even states that are usually considered to be Russia's partners, like Germany, voiced concerns. German DM Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said she believed Russia was "trying everything to provoke a reaction" and was "just waiting for a move, so to speak, from NATO, to have a pretext to continue its actions". The US and NATO reaffirmed their support for Kyiv and called on Russia to deescalate tensions. Joe Biden proposed holding a presidential summit with Vladimir Putin.

By constantly reminding its smaller and weaker neighbors of its great military power, Moscow thwarts the building of relations on an equal footing. Because

it kills trust, it decreases the chances for an expansion of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.

But perhaps most of all, this war scare, like many similar Russian moves, served to unify Ukraine's fragile political class and develop a sense of national integrity. Ultimately it is these two developments that trouble Russia the most. The more internally sound Ukraine becomes, the more time and resources it will take to pressure Kyiv.

While this episode is moving into the past, it nevertheless clarified that Ukraine is back on Russia's foreign policy agenda. The last year and a half were not particularly eventful on that front. Russia had other matters to attend to, whether in Belarus, Armenia, or elsewhere in Eurasia. A relative calm in Donbas was acceptable to both parties.

The circumstances are now different. US pressure on Moscow will be a continuous motivator. So too could be worsened ties with the EU—especially after the visit of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell to Russia, which underlined insurmountable differences between the parties.

What few people have noticed is that internal Ukrainian processes could also have instigated Moscow's show of force. Kyiv increased pressure on Russia-leaning Ukrainian politicians and targeted Russian TV channels. The tactical and strategic growth of Ukraine's army is another element in the puzzle. As time passes, the imbalance between the government and separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine, though still noticeable, is growing thinner. The country has retooled its military. Since 2014, defense spending has grown from \$1.9 billion to more than \$4.7 billion, which allowed Kyiv to establish 38 line and artillery brigades. International military cooperation with the US and Turkey is also expanding.

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