



Putin, Ukraine, and Russian Red Lines

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many are still wondering whether Vladimir Putin's massive troop deployment in conflict zones in the Donbas and the Crimean Peninsula in the spring of 2021 was preparation for eventual war and territorial gain or simply a public relations exercise meant to intimidate Ukraine and the West. The answer has to do with Putin's main red line.

In May-June 2021, many feared the worst as Vladimir Putin alarmed both Ukraine and NATO by conducting a massive deployment on Ukraine's borders. Was this a show of force, an indicator of a coming invasion, a test of Ukraine and its allies (including the US), or simple intimidation?

Putin's war with Ukraine

In 2014, Putin used stealth to advance Russian forces toward and into Ukrainian territory in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine. When pro-EU protests broke out in the Kyiv's *maidan* (public square), they led to armed struggle and revolution. Putin's response was to covertly insert masked and armed "little green men"; i.e., Russian elite special forces without uniform insignia, into Ukraine's strategic Crimean peninsula.

The takeover was bloodless, in part because the majority of the Crimean population is Russian. Moscow subsequently annexed Crimea, which is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Putin then tried an advance by stealth into Russian-friendly eastern Ukraine—an attempt that met with less success.

In 2021, Putin's approach was not stealthy but in full view. Hence the huge force buildup, which was designed to sow fear and panic among Ukrainian citizens and force Kyiv to accept some of Putin's demands. But unlike in 2014, the Ukrainians,

buoyed by Western support, were better prepared and determined to defend their country.

As Putin learned, the invasion would have been met with a serious Ukrainian defense. This would not have been a cake walk by “little green men” facing confused adversaries. Ukraine was both well organized and well equipped, and backed by NATO military aid.

The Russian operation of 2021 was the opposite of stealthy. It was a huge and deliberately visible flaunting of Russian capability. The Russian military buildup thus signaled a major escalation. Moscow deliberately uncovered its tanks in daylight, implying that the buildup was mainly a show of force intended to intimidate the adversary. The actions Putin ordered were neither regular exercises, a rehearsal, nor a prelude to an invasion. They were coercive diplomacy.

And what was the result?

The military build-up and drills conducted by Russia and Ukraine signaled the failure of both Moscow and Kyiv to move toward lasting peace. Naturally, both Ukraine and Russia blame each other for provoking the new tensions. Quite rationally, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky remains worried about the purpose of the Russian military buildup. In a wide-ranging interview on June 2, he told three US senators that though Russia had suspended military exercises, it still has [a massive military presence](#) at the border. “They have only pulled back about 10,000 soldiers,” he said—a fraction of the 100,000 troops concentrated near Ukraine in April. The buildup worries the West as well as Ukraine.

Putin’s red lines

Putin was quiet for weeks about the real purpose of the huge military build-up on the Ukrainian border. Finally, just prior to the NATO summit, he gave it away. He said the West will not be allowed to cross Russia’s “red lines”—and if it does, Russia will respond “harshly, quickly and asymmetrically.” But what red lines? Putin did not state it clearly, but his red line for Ukraine is this: Ukraine must not be allowed to join the Membership Application Plan [MAP] leading to its inclusion in NATO.

MAP for Ukraine

NATO’s MAP is designed to assist aspirant partner countries in their preparations to join the alliance by providing a framework that enables NATO to channel assistance and practical support to them on all aspects of membership.

Ukraine applied to begin the NATO MAP in 2008. That year, the Bucharest Summit rejected MAP for Ukraine and Georgia because of objections by Germany and France. Neither country wanted to provoke the Russians.

Plans for NATO membership for Ukraine were shelved again following the 2010 election of presidential pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych, who preferred to keep the country non-aligned. Following Yanukovych's revolutionary overthrow in 2014, his two successors, Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky, both tried repeatedly to enroll in the MAP with an eye toward eventually obtaining NATO membership for Ukraine.

This suggests that we might trust the explanation given by Russia's foreign ministry spokesperson for the country's moves at the beginning of the military buildup. She warned that Ukraine's bid for NATO membership could entail ["irreversible consequences for Ukrainian statehood."](#) In short, Russia was flexing its military muscles to prevent Ukraine's attempt to draw closer to NATO membership.

"As for NATO's enlargement and the advancement of NATO infrastructure toward Russia's borders, this has long been a matter of paramount significance to Russia, in terms of its national security," Putin said in a bitter interview shortly prior to the upcoming NATO summit. He stated that NATO enlargement in the past had been conducted against Russian national interests—indeed, that the Western powers "simply [spat upon our interests.](#)" He also said the NATO enlargement went against all the assurances Mikhail Gorbachev had received verbally from the Western powers. "All of our concerns were ignored," Putin said. "All the preliminary agreements (although they were verbal, with Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev—thank God he is in good health—you can ask him and he will definitely confirm it), they were sent into oblivion by the West."

The NATO Brussels Summit of 2021

Though NATO stated in 2008 that Ukraine would someday be invited to join the alliance, until 2020 NATO made little effort to make this invitation a reality. To Ukraine, membership in NATO is a must in the face of Russian intimidation. However, Germany and France, which have been aware of Putin's red lines since 2008, viewed Ukraine's push for NATO membership as unnecessary and provocative. In 2021, both countries still have the same objection. By contrast, the Baltic states and Poland are outspoken supporters of Ukraine's membership in NATO.

It was primarily because of German and French objections that NATO scrapped the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Georgia commissions that had been planned for the alliance's June 14, 2021 summit in Brussels. On May 6, the North

Atlantic Council decided, on the ambassadorial level, against inviting partner countries to attend the summit. Kyiv pleaded in vain with NATO to reconsider this decision. Ukraine was prepared to submit its case yet again for a NATO MAP at the summit, but its MAP application is now postponed indefinitely.

Zelensky pleaded with President Joe Biden to speak up on the issue of MAP. "If we are talking about NATO and the MAP, I would really like to get [from Biden] specifics—[yes or no](#)," a desperate Zelensky said. "We must get clear dates and the likelihood of this for Ukraine." But instead of a clear yes or no from Biden, the Ukrainian president got an extra \$150 million in US military aid. The US, despite positive (if ambiguous) rhetoric, decided to go along with Germany's and France's "no" to MAP for Ukraine. At a press conference, Biden disingenuously said nothing about Russian red lines but blamed the fact that Ukraine still has "[to clean up corruption](#)." The fact is, they have to meet other criteria to get into the action plan." He did not explain what the other criteria were.

Since 2020, meanwhile, Ukraine has been a member of a club of partner states that includes Australia, Jordan, Georgia, Sweden, and Finland. Known as the "Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP)," it was launched as a part of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative during the 2014 NATO Summit. Supported by France and Germany, this initiative maintains and further develops the interoperability of NATO members and partner states. Ukraine has benefited from EOP membership as it has been able to participate in allied NATO-led operations and exercises. To Ukraine, EOP is a preliminary substitute for MAP, which remains the program that would set it on the real path toward NATO membership.

Military exercises

From June 29 through July 10, the EOP will be preparing NATO maritime forces, numbering 4,000 troops and 40 combat ships, to take part in the Sea Breeze multilateral exercises in the Black Sea. This annual exercise, now in its 20th iteration, is co-hosted by the US and Ukraine, and aims to strengthen maritime security in the Black Sea region. The [US](#) military has rejected Russian claims that the joint Black Sea drills by the US, Ukraine, and other partnered countries will serve as cover for a secret weapons transfer to Ukraine. The main military conflict is in eastern Ukraine, not the Black Sea region.

Meanwhile, about 100,000 Russian forces are still deployed near the Ukrainian border. It appears that they and their equipment will remain where they are until the Zapad exercise, which will take place in September 2022. In the interim, as President Zelensky has pointed out, their function is to continue to intimidate both Ukraine and NATO.

Nord Stream 2: Biden's gift to Putin

By the time of the Putin-Biden summit in Geneva, the Russian signals had already been received in Washington. President Biden, aware of Russia's strong coercive power, decided to waive sanctions against the controversial Russian-owned Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany on the grounds that "[it's almost completely finished](#)." (Of course, Russian propaganda has been saying for two years that the project is almost completely finished).

Biden's decision was an unnecessary act of appeasement—indeed, it was a gift to Putin following the cyber terrorist attack that crippled the Colonial Pipeline, a key US fuel supplier. The result is more direct access of Gazprom gas to western European markets, putting US resources at a competitive disadvantage and reducing America's geopolitical influence. It not only enhances Russia's competitive advantage in Western Europe but provides Moscow with a geopolitical advantage in Eastern Europe, including a potential blackmail opportunity of Ukraine over the price of gas transported by the land pipeline through Ukrainian territory.

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline would allow Germany to effectively double the amount of gas it imports from Russia. Thus, in some Eastern European countries there is increased worry that Biden and Washington are going soft on Putin. It's a big win for Putin in Western Europe that underscores the difficulty Biden is having in turning his rhetoric on a tougher approach to Russia into action.

Conclusion

Russian intimidation has worked. Ukraine and Georgia were provided with various new instruments of military cooperation with NATO members, yet they were not invited to participate in the June 14, 2021 NATO summit. The main reason for their absence was that NATO is again divided on the issue: France and Germany oppose Ukraine's and Georgia's admission.

All the NATO leaders are undoubtedly aware of Russia's deep concerns about NATO membership for Ukraine, but Germany and France are particularly anxious about provoking him. It was out of similar concern that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia was derailed in 2008 at the Bucharest Summit. It is for this reason that Putin is keeping an unprecedented 100,000-person mobilization on the Ukrainian border: the show of force is a key element of his effort to intimidate both Ukraine and the West into abiding by his red lines.

Moscow's main goal, as Michael Kofman has said, is to signal to the Biden administration that "[Russia retains strong coercive power](#)" and can escalate at will to keep the West from crossing its red lines. It may also be signaling to the new US administration that Russia should be much higher on its foreign policy agenda.

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