



THE RUSSIAN THREAT TO INVADE UKRAINE

A Special Report
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INTRODUCTION

Tensions over the Russian threat to invade Ukraine are at their highest level since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. Although Russia says it has no plans to invade, US intelligence believes that as many as 175,000 Russian troops could become involved as early as January of 2022, and CIA Director William Burns believes President Putin "is putting the Russian military, the Russian security services in a place where they could act in a pretty sweeping way."

In order to analyze the latest developments in this area, Wikistrat consulted ten world-renowned experts on Russia, Ukraine, and military affairs from academia, policy and diplomacy, think tanks, and specialist private sector consultancies to assess the viability of the Russian threat to Ukraine. Wikistrat also sought to analyze related issues, including Russia's potential response to Western support for Ukraine and how Ukraine might deter Russia from initiating an invasion.

Wikistrat developed a set of nine questions. Each participant was asked to answer three questions analyzing different aspects of the threat. All experts assessed the likelihood of an invasion. This presentation includes each expert's responses along with Wikistrat's in-house expertise.

KEY STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

#1 The threat of an invasion is very real. The majority of experts judged the threat of a Russian invasion to be real or very real, based on the mobilization of tens of thousands of Russian troops and heightened Russian information campaigns against Ukraine. If Putin does not win concessions for his threats, he may feel compelled to engage in military action, though the inevitable costs of such an action may deter Moscow.

#2 Ukraine is in a weak position vis-à-vis deterring Russia. Ukraine finds itself in a quandary when it comes to deterring Russia. Of the three potential strategies analyzed – conciliation, escalation, and continuation – all present serious problems. Conciliation, which would demonstrate weakness in the face of Russian aggression, would likely only serve to further encourage Moscow. Escalation may alienate Ukraine's Western partners and, again, encourage Russia; it is also doubtful whether Ukraine has sufficient capabilities vis-à-vis Russia to back up a policy of escalation. Finally, a continuation of its current policy in collaboration with Western partners has thus far proved to be an inadequate deterrent, as evidenced in 2014.

#3 The West must do more to aid Ukraine and deter Russia. As above, Ukraine, in isolation, is unlikely to be able to deter Russia. The West must vocally and sincerely voice its commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russia's perception that the West would not step in to defend Ukraine in 2014 was a key factor in its calculation regarding the annexation of Crimea. Moscow is likely seeking divisions in NATO, the EU, and the West more broadly to exploit. Sanctions, equipping Ukraine, and vocal diplomacy will be key.

#4 Russia possesses sufficient military capability to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses. Though both Russian and Ukrainian forces have expanded their capabilities since 2014, Russia's military is still far superior. Russia has the ability to dominate Ukraine's skies and wage a strategic bombardment campaign that would be able to degrade the Ukrainian military's ability to invade itself. As one expert pointed out, if Moscow is willing to stomach the wider costs of war, it would be more than able to seriously disrupt Ukraine's military and infrastructure.

#5 The consequences of an invasion would extend far beyond Ukraine. A successful Russian invasion may allow it to extract significant concessions from both the West and Ukraine, but it would also likely be met with far-reaching sanctions. One potential area of major miscalculation for Moscow is the severity of the US, NATO, and Europe. Sanctions, particularly on the oil and gas sector, could potentially damage the regime domestically. Sanctions policy may succumb to divisions in the EU, however. The war may also spill over into other areas of Europe, further expanding the potential ramifications of an invasion.

ANALYTIC TEAM



Dr. Robert Dalsjö

Research Director in the Swedish Defence Research Agency's Department for Strategy and Policy.



Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg

Senior Research Scientist at CNA and an associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.



Dr. Richard Weitz

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Director of Octant Research & Analysis, an independent risk consultancy specializing in the former Soviet Union.



Samantha de Bendern

Associate Fellow at Chatham House.



Dr. Mark Galeotti

Director of Mayak Intelligence, a boutique consultancy concentrating on Russia, and an Honorary Professor at UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

How real is the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine?



Mark Galeotti: It's certainly a serious possibility, but we shouldn't assume it's Putin's first or preferred option – he must be aware of the very serious costs in any such escalation, not only financial ones from Western sanctions but also military ones on the battlefield and political ones back home given the lack of public enthusiasm for war. **Moscow's calculation is presumably that it can wrest some kind of concessions by its troop buildup, or at the very least demonstrate to Kyiv the limits of Western willingness to help.** However, at this stage, it is hard to see Putin being willing to stand his forces down unless he has at least something to show for his gambit, so he may feel compelled at least into some limited military action.

Dr. Mark Galeotti

Honorary Professor at UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies.



I fear the risk is very much real, at least large enough to treat it seriously as a possibility, and possibly the greatest risk of major war in Europe we have seen since Able Archer 1983, although – importantly – now there seems to be no tangible risk of nuclear escalation. Of course, Putin (i.e., the group ruling Russia) would prefer to get what he (they) wants without a war, and **some of the indicators we have seen might have been intentional leaks to raise the temperature and gain leverage, but I fear that if he doesn't get it, he may use the military instrument.**

Dr. Robert Dalsjö

Research Director in the Swedish Defence Research Agency's Department for Strategy and Policy.



I think the threat is real, though by no means guaranteed. I would put the chances of an invasion at around 40%. On the one hand, factors pushing against an invasion include the potential costs in casualties and economic consequences from painful sanctions. These would potentially lead to a decline in domestic support for Putin and his circle. On the other hand, there is the question of credibility. **If you are Putin, how often can you threaten military action without carrying it out before your adversaries start calling your bluff and not taking you seriously?** Also, the Russian government has spent the last six years trying to make the Russian economy less susceptible to sanctions, so that may reduce the pain. And certainly, Russian leaders don't believe that the US and NATO will directly involve themselves in a conflict with Russia in Ukraine, so the risk of an invasion turning into a wider war is assessed as relatively low.

Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg

Senior Research Scientist at CNA and an associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.



The threat of a massive Russian invasion to occupy all of Ukraine (as in the 1920s) is improbable due to the substantial military forces required for such an attack, the economic costs to Russia of sustaining such an extensive occupation in the face of massive Western sanctions along with Ukrainian popular opposition, and Russia's ability to obtain its main objectives in Ukraine short of full conquest.

The possibility of a Russian attack and occupation of additional Ukrainian territory is somewhat more plausible. Not only has Moscow already occupied Ukrainian territory since 2014, but the military requirements for limited conquest would be lower than a full occupation. Still, this development is unlikely to occur in the near term.

Most likely, we will see a continuation of Moscow's policy of manipulating periodic war scares in order to keep Ukraine out of NATO, secure concessions from the United States, and pursue other goals not entailing the costs of a Russian military attack on Ukrainian territory.

Dr. Richard Weitz

Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analyses at Hudson Institute.



The threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine is very real even if we cannot precisely gauge the precise nature of any intended Russian military outcome. **One does not mobilize what is expected by US intelligence to be 175,000 men and accompanying material plus the logistics support these forces need unless you are making a serious threat that Moscow wants everyone to see.** Furthermore, Moscow is now threatening the use of its missiles, both nuclear and conventional, against NATO members and has evidently intensified its never-ending information broadsides against Ukraine.

Dr. Stephen J. Blank

Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program and Senior Fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council.



Very real! A few caveats. First of all, Russia has already invaded Ukraine in 2014. So any further military movement in this country will technically be a re-invasion or re-incursion.

Second, further military moves by Russia into Ukraine have never been off the table since 2014-2015 and the signing of the Minsk-2 agreements. What changed today is that a military option is higher up in the list of available options in Moscow's foreign policy basket regarding Ukraine.

When it comes to the current threat, what we see today is fundamentally military logistics contingency planning for future military operations in Ukraine. The Russian armed forces spend a lot of time practicing peacetime organization of force and pre-positioning of military equipment and gear in key strategic nodes, and this is exactly what we've been seeing here since March-April 2021.

Russian military movements happened in three phases:

1. March-April 2021 – Troops and gear movements from the Central Military District were observed toward Crimea and Pogonovo (Voronezh region). The excuse of “pre-Zapad planning” was used by the Kremlin.
2. Post-Zapad (Sept-October) – Repositioning of troops from Pogonovo to other parts of the Western MD, including Yelnya (Smolensk region).
3. Since November – Activation of military logistics and initial period of war triggers (military support such as medical gear, ammo, etc. as well as National Guard Units). These are very worrying signs.

All in all, the Kremlin stands ready for further military operations into Ukraine and just needs a political trigger – whether a political decision from Putin itself or developments in Ukraine (escalation, incidents, etc.) and in the international community (sufficient perceived Russian guarantees that the US and NATO won't do anything to help Ukraine).

In any case, the Kremlin will need a trigger – anything that they can use to “justify” a military movement (i.e. “Ukraine shot first”).

Mathieu Boulegue

Research Fellow at Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme.



Technically, the threat is very real. To “invade,” Russia does not need, at least initially, to pour hundreds of thousands of troops across the border. Much can be accomplished via contactless warfare. Not only does Russia outnumber Ukraine in manpower terms, it has the same numerical advantage in every other respect – it has many times more tanks than Ukraine, more light armor than Ukraine, more artillery than Ukraine – but it applies especially to what is known as long-range fires, land, air, and sea. The long-range fires Russia has both outnumber and outrange those Ukraine has – if it has them at all. On land, Russia is in a position to concentrate several hundred short-range – though long-range enough – ballistic missiles (Iskander). At sea, Russia can leverage its inventory of shipborne long-range cruise missiles (Kalibr). In the air, in addition to its numerically strong army aviation and air force (not Ukraine’s strong suit), Russia has a similarly substantial arsenal of stand-off air-launched munitions. Significant military damage can be inflicted by this alone.

If this is the nature of Russia’s military deployments near Ukraine (something not easy to ascertain from open sources), then it says a lot about Russia’s intent.

Politically, it is unknowable. What benefit would accrue to Russia were it to invade Ukraine? Considered rationally, none. The risks are massive, from Russia’s ever-deeper political isolation potentially up to and including expulsion from the UN as we know it; to its international economic interests, be it financial isolation, Nord Stream 2, or potentially a far broader boycott of its oil and gas sector, the lifeline of the regime. The risks are far less clear domestically. As a foreign policy grandmaster, Russia would have weighed up all of them and – if it invades – would have presumably found them light. Besides, one’s “rationales” are not always rational.

Russian pundits are divided. One school of thought is that the “momentum” toward war is unstoppable. The other is that “this is the way Putin phones Biden.”

Psychologically, if not psychiatrically, my personal assessment is that, to Putin, war *in* Ukraine is one thing, but war *with* Ukraine would be quite another. I hope that sanity prevails.

Valeriy Akimenko

Senior Research Associate at the Conflict Studies Research Centre



Russia and Ukraine may be on the brink of a war that could, in a worst-case scenario, reach unprecedented dimensions in post-war Europe. It is uncertain though how both the Western and Russian public would react to such a war. **Past experiences appear to suggest that neither future foreign reactions nor a pacifist stance of ordinary Russians can be counted on as constraining factors. Russia's blunt occupation of one-fifth of Georgia's territory in 2008 and official annexation of Crimea in 2014 were both popular with Russians. They increased support for Putin's regime and anti-Western sentiments.**

Worse, the West's reactions to Russia's southern expansions were restrained. No worth-mentioning sanctions were imposed on Moscow in 2008. Oddly, Russian-Western relations instead improved in the aftermath of the war and occupation of Georgia. In 2014, Russia's open annexation of Crimea and covert intervention in the Donbas were initially punished with minor sanctions. Their then limited effects encouraged the Kremlin to escalate further.

Moderately significant EU sectoral sanctions were, to be sure, imposed on Moscow in summer 2014. Yet, they were obviously a reaction to Russia's killing of over 200 EU citizens on Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 that a Russian regular army unit shot down over Eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014. This might suggest to Putin & Co. that Russian territorial expansion is not a big issue for the West. The Kremlin only needs to avoid killing EU citizens *en masse*.

(cont...)

Dr. Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



(cont...)

The key variables determining both the observed past and possible future Moscow behavior are the relative costs of military escalations and these costs' public assessment in Russia. The material and human losses from Moscow's 2008 and 2014 escapades looked then and still look today as altogether permissible to many Russians. Concerning Moscow's 2008 Georgian operation, they were and remain objectively low. In the case of Russia's attack on Ukraine, its relative overall price has been perceived, by the Russian public, as being bearable. The effects of the 2014 national triumph of Putin's swift grab of the beautiful Crimean Peninsula can still be felt today. Many Russians continue to tolerate, in view of Crimea's annexation, Russia's ongoing socio-economic stagnation that resulted from, among other factors, the Western sanctions regime set up in 2014.

The Kremlin's behavior was thus, in a certain sense, rational in both 2008 and 2014. The expansionist aggressions increased public support for Putin's regime and decreased support for the West. At the same time, the political and financial expenses were limited for Putin's regime. One can only speculate that both repercussions – the large and immediate domestic political gains, on the one hand, and the minor or muted foreign economic fatalities, on the other – were expected by the decision-makers in the Kremlin. **From their point of view, it might have been a sin of omission to not take swift advantage of the fortuitous windows of opportunity that had opened in Georgia in August 2008 and in Ukraine in February 2014.**

While the situation looks grim, not all is lost. A principal difference of the current tensions from those before Moscow's attacks on Georgia in 2008 and on Ukraine in 2014 is that Russia's socio-economic outlook is today bleak. The Russian people, in principle, do not want war with Ukraine. They may be less inclined toward foreign adventures than during times of relative economic success. If Russia and the West keep a cool head and show enough resolve, a major new war may be avoided.

Dr. Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.



Russia already has invaded Ukraine. It has annexed Crimea and Russian military personnel, both in uniform and unmarked uniform, are operating alongside Ukrainian separatists in the Donbas.

I would therefore rephrase the question and ask: Will Russia change its posture and overtly send troops into Ukraine or intensify the semi-covert military operations that have been ongoing since the 2014 invasion?

The buildup of troops on the Ukrainian border is the biggest buildup since 2015. Intelligence experts, using a mix of satellite data, intercepted communications, and human intelligence, estimate that there could be anything between 90,000 and 175,000 troops in four distinct areas from north to south of the Ukrainian border, with accompanying military hardware. This gives Russia the capacity to act swiftly and decisively should it decide to invade Ukraine.

Moreover, Russia is intensifying cyber-attacks and disinformation inside Ukraine. This creates the potential for a fabricated provocation that could force a Ukrainian response and thus provide an excuse for an invasion.

In this context, the threat of overt military invasion of Ukraine is very real, and Putin is making sure that both Ukraine and NATO know this. It is the reality of this threat that prompted the Biden-Putin video summit on December 7.

A less dramatic scenario would be for Russia to covertly increase military assistance to the separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, in the form of personnel or hardware, with the aim of helping them take over further territory; the most likely targets are the city of Mariupol in the south, an important seaport, or the strategic towns of Kramatorsk, Slavyansk, and Kharkiv. This scenario would not involve the overt presence of Russian troops in Ukraine and would provide Putin with the deniability he has used ever since the beginning of the conflict in 2014.

Samantha de Bendern
Associate Fellow at Chatham House.



Russia considers military force to be a means to an end. The objective is to coerce Ukraine into accepting Russia's interpretation of the so-called Minsk-2 agreement of February 2015 – in particular, forcing the authorities in Kyiv to grant far-reaching autonomy ("special status") to Russia's puppet regimes in the occupied Donbas, which would be formally reincorporated into Ukraine but would in reality entrench Russian influence at the heart of Ukraine's political system. Russia's leaders judge that Ukraine has not assented to this because it is being propped up and manipulated by the leading Western powers – it is under "external management," as Putin has repeatedly claimed. By threatening military escalation, the Kremlin intends (i) to break Ukraine's will to resist and (ii) to browbeat Western capitals into disengaging (either abandoning Ukraine to face Russia on its own or pressing Ukraine to deliver Russia's version of Minsk-2).

Two assumptions underlie this calculus. One is the view, widely held in Russia, that a sovereign and independent Ukraine is an aberration of history: weak, divided, and unviable as a State yet inextricably part of the "Russian World," and the central component of Russia's sphere of influence. As Putin has stated many times, Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" with a shared destiny. The Kremlin's other core assumption is that in a protracted confrontation over Ukraine, Western capitals will ultimately back down: Ukraine is not the existential issue for them that it is for Russia. More generally, Russia's decision-makers view the leading Western Powers as irresolute and divided within and among themselves.

This calculus is not new. Since 2015, the Kremlin has used various forms of coercion, including low-level military pressure in the Donbas, to secure implementation of its interpretation of Minsk-2. What is new this year is the extent of Russia's military build-up along Ukraine's border and its increasingly aggressive rhetoric directed at Ukraine and the West. **The most important explanation for the shift in gear is the Kremlin's growing disillusionment with Zelenskiy, whose election in 2019 was misinterpreted in Moscow as evidence that a more Russia-friendly leader had taken office in Kyiv and would offer substantive concessions over Minsk-2.**

(cont...)

Duncan Allan

Director of Octant Research & Analysis, an independent risk consultancy specializing in the former Soviet Union.



(cont...)

Although Russia's leaders would prefer to achieve their objectives without a major military escalation, they have assembled the forces to escalate should they decide that this is necessary. We do not, however, know (i) the circumstances in which they might take such a decision or (ii) how they would use the capabilities at their disposal. As regards (i), two plausible triggers – neither of them likely – would be an offer of a NATO Membership Action Plan to Ukraine or an offensive by Ukraine against the puppet regimes in the Donbas (perhaps in response to Russian provocations of the type that sparked the Russia/Georgia war in 2008). Otherwise, it is virtually impossible to identify in advance the point at which the Kremlin might decide to escalate. As regards (ii), Russia's military planners will almost certainly have drawn up a menu of options that cover operations of varying degrees of ambition, scope, and intensity. This adds to the uncertainty surrounding the intentions of decision-makers in Moscow.

A combination of three factors could constrain Russia. First, the prospect of severe Western economic sanctions. Second, maximum public exposure of the military buildup along Ukraine's border: this would minimise the element of surprise available to Russia. Third, a calculation in the Kremlin that military escalation would lead to unacceptable Russian casualties. To be clear, however, none of these factors on its own is likely to deter the Kremlin, although all three together might.

Meanwhile, there is a real risk of miscalculation by Russia's decision-makers. Because they see Ukraine as a failed State, believe that Ukrainians remain biddable, and doubt Western resolve, they might decide to escalate the use of force in order simultaneously (i) to provoke a political crisis in Kyiv that, they calculate, could bring a more pliable administration to power and (ii) to alarm the West into disengaging.

Duncan Allan

Director of Octant Research & Analysis, an independent risk consultancy specializing in the former Soviet Union.

**Considering both internal and external reasons, why could
Russia invade Ukraine?**



What clinched it (the real risk of war) for me was the realization that A) what is at stake is Russia's status as a great power; Ukraine is slipping away from Russia's grasp and Russia needs to reassert itself – if it cannot bend Ukraine to its will and get US acceptance for this, Russia will no longer be a great power, and B) that in Putin's and the Kremlin's Hobbesian worldview, you have got to be strong (i.e. a great power) to survive. If you are not strong, you are weak, and the weak get beaten and robbed.

Putin is not primarily after land (Russia has plenty...) but after an assured position for Russia as a great power, with its own sphere of influence recognized by both minions and other great power in a revamped European security order, and thus also an assured position as a ruler and gatherer of Russian lands. This is about emotions, strategic culture, and identity, and emotions/culture eats strategy for breakfast.

Dr. Robert Dalsjö

Research Director in the Swedish Defence Research Agency's Department for Strategy and Policy.



In terms of goals, Moscow might conduct an invasion of Ukraine to secure the subjugation of more Ukrainian territory, help Moscow press Kyiv into making concessions to Russia, encourage divisions within Ukrainians regarding the Russian question, further decrease the prospects of Ukraine entering NATO, divert attention from Moscow's continued occupation of Crimea and other areas of eastern Ukraine, enhance Moscow's control over Belarus, exploit cleavages between Ukraine and its Western partners, probe for divisions between NATO members on the Ukraine question, and offer Moscow leverage to tradeoff to secure concessions from Washington on various issues.

In terms of developments that might precipitate an invasion, these might include indications that Ukraine was about to join NATO, host substantial NATO troops, or acquire advanced US offensive strike weapons. Another precipitating factor might be a Ukraine offensive campaign to recover Crimea or, if it appeared to be making success, to restore Kyiv's control over the breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine. Moscow could, of course, engineer a provocation, as in 2008 against Georgia, that leads Ukraine to attack in order to justify the Russian counterattack.

(cont...)

Dr. Richard Weitz

Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analyses at Hudson Institute.



(cont...)

Internal divisions in Ukraine might also encourage a Russian attack if Ukrainians appeared weak and divided. At the extreme, a pro-Russian faction might seize power somewhere, declare itself the legitimate government of Ukraine, and call on Moscow to send in forces in its defense – in other words, this scenario would repeat the process by which Moscow justified its invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan during the Cold War.

The same would hold true if Moscow believed other countries would not provide much protection to Ukraine, perhaps due to some earlier action that alienated Ukraine from its Western partners, or if US foreign policy turned decisively isolationist, if Putin saw the US president as weak, or if Washington appeared willing to sacrifice Ukraine in return for Russian concessions on other issues (such as Iran or China). NATO's collapse or serious degradation in cohesion would remove a check on Russian aggression. Evident European and Chinese indifference to Ukraine's fate might also encourage Russian assertiveness.

Additionally, a Russian invasion is more likely if it appeared that the balance of military forces had decisively shifted in favor of the Russian armed forces due to weaknesses of the Ukrainian military. President Putin might also decide to precipitate a war with Ukraine to rally support behind his presidency, though the controlled nature of the Russian political system and other risks of a war might discourage pursuing this course.

Dr. Richard Weitz

Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analyses at Hudson Institute.

What could deter Putin from ordering an invasion of Ukraine?



Putin is making it clear that he wants guarantees from NATO that Ukraine will not join the Alliance and some sort of written assurance that Ukraine will remain neutral. If the Alliance, or even individual members, were to come out publicly with such a statement, this would be tantamount to acknowledging that Ukraine is not able to make its own sovereign decisions and that its fate is in the hands of the “Great Powers.” This will not happen.

In reality, Putin knows that Ukraine cannot join NATO, in spite of the fact that Ukraine has embedded the goals of eventual EU and NATO membership in its constitution. One of the fundamental conditions for a candidate to NATO membership is the absence of territorial disputes or unresolved conflicts. By occupying Crimea and the Donbas, Putin has created the conditions that rule out Ukraine’s accession to NATO. He knows this, and in this context insisting on guarantees that Ukraine will not join NATO is creating a smokescreen he can hide behind, should he decide to invade on the pretext that Ukraine is about to join the Alliance.

The US has ruled out providing overt military assistance in the form of troops on the ground to Ukraine. Allies could increase their existing military support to Ukraine in terms of advice, training, and hardware, but this would have to increase significantly to provide real deterrence.

On the eve of the Putin-Biden video summit, Americans and Europeans have been discussing cutting Russia out of the SWIFT system of international payments.

Other suggestions are:

- Freezing the certification of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.
- Threats to freeze the assets of those associated with the Putin regime and a potential invasion of Ukraine.
- In a suggestion that has so far been made regarding Aliaksandr Lukashenka’s regime in Belarus, the creation of a war crimes tribunal and a “wanted list” for those guilty of war crimes in Russian occupied territories in Ukraine.

One of the biggest obstacles to really hitting the Putin regime where it hurts is the close ties between Western business and political elites and Russian state-controlled companies. As long as senior Western politicians retire into lucrative positions on the boards of Russian state-owned or quasi state-owned companies, as long as leading Western businesses partner up with state-controlled Russian businesses in significant energy projects, and as long as London and New York continue to host the majority of Russian IPOs, sanctions and other threats will have a diluted effect.

Samantha de Bendern
Associate Fellow at Chatham House.



To deter Putin, we must realize that he has bet the farm, i.e. the survival of his system, on the destruction of Ukraine and has yet to show success, in his eyes, from that. Therefore, he has no choice but to redouble his bet with a massive show of force. The signs to Russia of NATO's growing presence, Turkish drones, and enhanced Western military presence, plus growing reforms that strike at the pro-Moscow oligarchs stimulates Putin's awareness that time is running out on his great gamble. To deter him and his use of all the instruments of state power, our deterrence strategy must also be a multi-or cross-domain one incorporating all those elements of state power. Second, it must include the whole NATO alliance to make clear that the West cannot be split.

Subject to international consultation, a program of action against Moscow would therefore encompass the following measures:

NATO should first begin a visible and long-term program of conventional buildup along the frontier with Russia and it should be sustained well into the future. It should terminate (Sine die) Nord Stream 1 and 2 and the US and other suppliers should pick up the slack of LNG supplies to Europe while also adding sanctions that would also render the pipeline inoperable. The sanctions can, if necessary, go to the SWIFT code sanction and isolate Russia entirely from the While we are discussing sanctions, a third move would be to impose sanctions on Putin personally as well as the leading members of the Russian government and indict him for war crimes at the Hague (there are many others involved too, and many other crimes as well). These sanctions would also affect third parties to make it highly costly for, e.g., Chinese banks to support Russia.

Fourth, Ukraine should be encouraged to regenerate its own indigenous missile industry and deploy them to deter or counter an invasion. By breaking the Budapest Agreement of 1995, Moscow should be made to realize that this is a real option for Kyiv.

(cont...)

Dr. Stephen J. Blank

Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program and Senior Fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council.



(cont...)

Fifth, NATO should not only continue but expand its presence in the Black Sea and do so on a regular basis to make clear to Moscow that it is not a closed Russian lake. This means naval and other support for Georgia and the expansion of the permanent role of NATO in and around that sea as part of its overall strategy.

Sixth, Washington ought to initiate a lend-lease program for Ukraine just as it did for the UK and Russia in WWII. Ukraine could lease Black Sea ports to the US in return for unused or about to be mothballed naval vessels and platforms, and this could be done for aircraft as well. For example, a US-funded aid or “lend-lease” package of 100 or more F-15s, weapons, and spares would send an unambiguous message to Moscow – give up on future invasion plans and get out of occupied Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Washington and Brussels should simultaneously shut down avenues for Russian money in member countries and Russian spy networks but tie these activities as well to an eighth point – namely an expanded information warfare campaign targeted at Russians. This would bring home to them the costs of the Ukraine gamble and the enduring criminality and corruption of the elite while they are deprived of any hope of economic betterment. We would also suspend strategic stability talks and proceed full steam ahead with our nuclear modernization programs. And, equally, if not more importantly, we and NATO should flood Ukraine with weapons, advisors, and support to make it, as Melinda Haring has suggested, into a second Afghanistan for Russia.

We must make clear that we will make this into a protracted war that Putin cannot tolerate and make clear that we will take escalation control away from him (this is a paramount goal throughout). Moreover, we must constantly remind him that Russian history shows that protracted wars are the gravest and often fatal test of a Russian regime, and we will make this as prolonged as possible so that he and his entourage, not to mention other Russians realize that he has here again “bet the farm” on Ukraine and will lose Russia as a result.

Dr. Stephen J. Blank

Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute’s Eurasia Program and Senior Fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council.

In your opinion, what would be the outcome of a Russian invasion of Ukraine?



Militarily, the movements recently observed leave a maximalist option for the Kremlin to move in force widely into Ukraine. But that's the maximalist option. The reality would be different.

We can imagine a surprise military campaign where Russia would force Ukrainian forces close to the Line of Contact in Donbas, as well as toward the "border" with Crimea. This entrapment would allow Moscow to obtain the aforementioned trigger/justifier to go to war (again).

This would be followed by a mix of long-range precision strikes and ground artillery support fires, coupled with electronic warfare and air superiority missions. Enough to defeat the Ukrainian armed forces at the initial period of war.

Phase 2 could be Russian troops marching further into Ukraine – effectively squeezing the country from the south (Crimea) to the north (Smolensk oblast), as well as using proxy forces in Donbas.

The last phase is fait accompli creation and holding any potential conquered territory in Ukraine against resistance/anti-occupation Ukrainian forces.

The outcome of a re-invasion is, first and foremost, political and diplomatic for the Kremlin. Moscow has no intention of seizing further Ukrainian territory for the sake of it. You don't leave your adversary that much time to prepare their defenses if you plan to invade them...

Fundamentally, Russia would want to defeat the Ukrainian army in order to compel Kyiv and obtain political/diplomatic concessions.

Also politically, Russia might not even have to re-invade at all and merely use the threat of invasion to its advantage. Creating a sense of unrest is already enormous psychological warfare that could lead to compellence for Ukraine.

The threat of war might be enough for Moscow to leverage its interest and coerce Ukraine even more in order to achieve political goals (whether it is the full application of Minsk-2, or a Minsk-3 under duress, etc.).

Mathieu Boulegue

Research Fellow at Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme.



The consequences for Ukraine will be varying degrees of catastrophe, depending on whether the invasion results in the loss of limited swathes of territory in the South, near the port of Mariupol, or in the Donbas, or further the North around Kharkiv, or leads to a coup in Kyiv and/or loss of the whole of the East of the country. In this latter scenario, one can imagine Western Ukraine carving out a separate Western aligned state with its capital in Lviv.

Losing Mariupol would limit Ukraine's access to the Black Sea, to the extent that the country would be almost landlocked.

The outcome for the rest of the world will depend on the reaction of the US, NATO, and the EU.

The US has threatened severe economic sanctions that would go as far as a ban on the secondary market in Russian bonds and sanctions on major Russian corporations and banks. Germany has apparently agreed to cease all certification of Nord Stream 2 if an invasion takes place. All of this will come at an economic cost to the West as well.

A robust military response would involve the further deployment of NATO troops and hardware in the Baltic States, Eastern Europe, and potentially the Black Sea flank as well, thus increasing overall geopolitical tensions and the potential for escalation of the conflict. The kind of military assistance that is offered Ukraine will probably include increased military training and consultations and the sale of hardware. Ukraine may ask for, but not necessarily obtain, assistance in securing its airspace.

A robust response from the West would send a message to Putin that it is prepared to stand by those who aspire to join the club of democratic nations and open societies. It would also send a message to China that it would respond similarly to an attempt to invade Taiwan.

A lackluster response would have the opposite effect, and this must be at the forefront of Biden's calculations in his attempt to calibrate the response to potential Russian aggression.

Ultimately, a Russian invasion of Ukraine will force NATO and the EU to face the strategic decisions that could shape the new world order for the coming decades. Do Western nations decide to look inward and concentrate on their own problems in the hope of creating hermetic bubbles of peace, prosperity, and freedom? Or do they defend those who aspire to espouse democratic values at any price?

Samantha de Bendern

Associate Fellow at Chatham House.

Of the potential outcomes, which is the least predictable and controllable for Russia?



Unpalatable outcomes for the Kremlin are two-fold: First, more NATO and US involvement than Moscow would be comfortable with – notably, the threat of US military support for Ukraine if Russia re-invades. Moscow probably calculates that *“the US won’t go to war with us over Ukraine”* but might miscalculate Washington’s ability to push back against Russian military movements.

Russia has yet to draw Ukraine and the US/NATO out of the woods regarding their intentions under pressure – notably testing US willingness to defend Ukraine. If a “winter invasion” is really planned between now and the spring, US, NATO, and European commitments toward Ukraine will be paramount. It would otherwise give an excuse for the Kremlin to use force against Ukraine.

Second, the overall military cost of further invasion might be under-estimated in Moscow. The Donbas operations in 2014-2015 were planned on bad human intelligence and human mapping – Moscow basically over-estimated Donbas’ willingness to take up arms and “become Russians.” This led to a complicated information warfare campaign and many failures in terms of ideological products (Novorossiia, local separatist movements, etc.).

Such could be the case again. Worse for Moscow, the potential under-estimation of Ukrainian citizens to organize in order to repel the invading force. Ukrainians will defend their country and use all means necessary to do it (reserve forces, territorial defense units, insurgents, volunteers, etc.). There’s no telling whether this has been fully factored in by Moscow.

Seizing territory in Ukraine is one thing; keeping it is another.

Mathieu Boulegue

Research Fellow at Chatham House’s Russia and Eurasia Programme.



Because the Kremlin does not take Ukrainian national consciousness seriously, the outcome that it would find the least predictable and controllable is actually the easiest to anticipate: Ukraine’s reaction. This would have at least three aspects. First, no Ukrainian leader would be able to implement Russia’s interpretation of Minsk-2, especially as regards “special status.” Even if they wanted to, merely appearing open to such a settlement would guarantee their removal from office; it might also set off wider political instability in Ukraine. Second, a significant military escalation by Russia would run into ferocious armed opposition. Even if Russia inflicted devastating losses on Ukraine’s armed forces, as it might (and could), its own casualties might well be heavy – perhaps on a scale that the authorities in Moscow deemed politically unacceptable. Third, Ukraine would become even more antagonistic toward Russia and even less likely to accept satellite status – the opposite of the outcome that the Kremlin envisages.

Duncan Allan

Director of Octant Research & Analysis, an independent risk consultancy specializing in the former Soviet Union.

How would Russia respond to the West providing logistical/intelligence support to Ukraine?



There is not a lot it can do about this. Backed up by overwhelming military superiority against Ukraine on its own, it might consider this to be a minor inconvenience. It is often said that Russia's very real firepower is hamstrung by a lack of meaningful ISR capabilities. It might think that the situation is the reverse of that in Ukraine's case – an ISR capability without meaningful firepower, at least when compared to Russia's. The probability it might target Western logistical/intelligence assets is remote, but this must not be discounted. It might think the risk of greater Western involvement such action might provoke negligible or manageable if it assesses the escalation ladder to be tall, up to nuclear.

Valeriy Akimenko

Senior Research Associate at the Conflict Studies Research Centre.



The West is already providing logistical and intelligence support to Ukraine. If this continued after a Russian military escalation, the Kremlin would step up its information war effort, amplifying the alleged risk of a wider European conflict, to scare Western capitals into ending their support, thus leaving Ukraine isolated and weakened. It would also seek to exploit divisions within and among NATO/EU countries. In addition, Russia would probably intensify certain "gray zone" activities, such as cyber-enabled attacks on Western targets. Again, the aim would be to cow, confuse, and demoralize Western audiences.

Beyond that point, much would depend on two factors. First, Ukraine's reaction, particularly the resilience of its state institutions and the effectiveness with which its armed forces fought back. The other factor would be the view that Russian decision-makers took as regards Western resolve. If the Ukrainian state survived the initial shock of a major military escalation (as is likely), if Ukrainians resisted with determination (as is certain), and if Western countries stood firm and united (which is less clear), would Russian decision-makers dial up the violence even further? Answering that question, however, entails speculating far beyond grounded first premises and is therefore of limited analytical value.

Duncan Allan

Director of Octant Research & Analysis, an independent risk consultancy specializing in the former Soviet Union.

How effective would a Russian strategic bombardment campaign against Ukraine be? What goals would it aim to achieve?



The goal would be to degrade the Ukrainian military's ability to defend itself, with a ground invasion to follow. I don't believe that Russia would pursue a bombing campaign as a sole strategy, as it would be relatively unlikely to achieve Russian goals of forcing Ukraine to make concessions on its geopolitical orientation.

Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg

Senior Research Scientist at CNA and an associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.



Russia has the capacity to dominate Ukraine's skies and also long-range fires such as SS-26/Iskander missiles that have a 500km range, so Moscow can certainly launch serious attacks. The likelihood is that these would be used to target not cities and similar civilian objectives but airbases, barracks, troops concentrations, railway stations, bridges, and the like, and there is little doubt that – if willing to accept the wider costs of embarking on a full-scale war – it could seriously disrupt Ukraine's military and infrastructure.

Dr. Mark Galeotti

Honorary Professor at UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

How effective would a limited Russian campaign against Ukraine be?

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I think that such a campaign would be relatively effective at defeating Ukrainian forces and forcing concessions. The scenario would be similar to the 2008 Georgian war scenario, where Russia takes territory, not with the intent of holding it but rather to force a political outcome and then withdraw. While the Ukrainian military is far more capable than it was in 2014-15, so is the Russian military. And unlike that conflict, it would not be hampered by the need to pretend it was not there. It would be difficult for Russia to occupy substantial Ukrainian territory for a long time because of the expense involved and the potential for underground resistance. But I suspect that an initial invasion would result in significant territorial gains in the initial period of war.

Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg

Senior Research Scientist at CNA and an associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.

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Well, it depends what “limited” means and what the intentions are. Any attempt to seize and hold significant amounts of territory, especially if this includes urban areas, will lock Russia into a long-term, intractable, and likely bloody pacification campaign. The Russians have the capacity to beat the Ukrainian military on the battlefield, of that there is little doubt, but if the goal is to do more than demonstrate this strength, then this becomes much messier. Is “effective” just about winning battles? In this case, it would be effective. But is it actually about obtaining strategic objectives and imposing a wider political solution on Kyiv at acceptable costs? Personally, I very much doubt it.

Dr. Mark Galeotti

Honorary Professor at UCL’s School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

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Russia’s conventional armed forces far exceed Ukraine’s in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Moreover, Russia is a nuclear super-power, while Ukraine is a non-nuclear-weapons state forbidden to acquire any atomic warheads under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Still, over the last seven years, Ukraine has built up a formidable conventional army, which is battle-hardened. The Ukrainian forces are now partly equipped with modern high-tech weapons – both Ukraine-built and foreign. They would be supported by more Western arms and intelligence in case of an escalation. In view of these factors, it is unclear whether Russia could attain as easily and quickly a manifest victory as was the case in the August 2008 five-day Russian-Georgian war.

Dr. Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

What can Ukraine do in order to deter Russia from initiating an invasion?

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Declare a partial or general mobilization. That is the right thing to do in the face of existential danger.

Be proactive in the information space, which must not be ceded to Russia's malign information influence operations. Continue to ring the alarm internationally. Also, with international assistance, challenge the insidious notions cooked up by Russian propaganda of Ukraine "under external control" as it amasses troops ready to retake Donbas – and even Crimea – by force.

Do this forcefully, at the UN, at the OSCE, and if European assistance can be secured, in the EU/European Parliament. Russia must not be allowed to get away with it. Just as malign Russian propaganda never sleeps, the effort to challenge it must be continuous rather than sporadic.

Valeriy Akimenko

Senior Research Associate at the Conflict Studies Research Centre.

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At one extreme, the Ukrainian government could formally relinquish control over Crimea and Eastern Ukraine to Moscow, restore power to pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians, or pledge never to join NATO or allow NATO forces to deploy on its territory. Such concessions, however, would alienate Ukraine from its Western partners and would essentially restore Moscow's Soviet-era control over Ukraine.

At another extreme, Ukraine could try to establish a credible nuclear deterrent that would assure a second-strike retaliation even if Russia attacked Ukraine first. Such an effort would initially have to be covert and, only after completed, then presented to the world as a *fait accompli*. Such a course is extremely risky, however, and would also alienate Ukraine from its Western partners.

Alternately, Ukraine can continue to enhance relations with NATO countries and strengthen its armed forces with Western security assistance. Ukraine can also build ties with China, Turkey, and other third countries that can influence Russian decision-making on its behalf. Ukrainian officials can also accelerate their domestic economic and political reforms to fortify Ukraine against Russian hybrid threats and make Ukraine a more attractive partner for Western countries. This approach would essentially continue Ukraine's current strategy; the risk is that it may not by itself provide an adequate deterrent against Russian aggression.

Dr. Richard Weitz

A Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analyses at Hudson Institute.



First, the government and society of Ukraine should be careful to avoid situations that could be presented as semi-legitimate *casus belli* by the Kremlin to the outside world and Russian population, and that can create an impression of internal Ukrainian weakness. Kyiv needs to avert domestic conflicts that can lead to a disbalance that the Kremlin may think it can shrewdly exploit.

Second, the Ukrainian state and nation need to signal to Moscow unambiguously that they are ready and united to fight it out from the start to the end. The Kremlin should get the impression that a new Russian invasion will, unlike in the case of Crimea in 2014, trigger immediate and resolute military resistance and that there will be no hasty pledge for a cease-fire on whatever terms, like in Georgia in 2008.

Third, Kyiv should ask the West to communicate through public and non-public channels its readiness to impose sanctions that would be more than symbolic. To achieve a united decision by all 27 member states will not be easy. Unfortunately, the UK is not any longer a member, while Poland, as Ukraine's most prolific advocate in the EU, is hampered by a homemade conflict with Brussels. It will thus need other members of the Union to take a lead in suggesting and pushing through sanctions.

Dr. Andreas Umland

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

THE RUSSIAN THREAT TO INVADE UKRAINE

A Special Report
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