



Rising Tensions Between Russia and Ukraine

Historical Background

As Russian forces mass at the Ukrainian border, it is important to note that this is neither unprecedented nor entirely unexpected.

In 2014, pro-Russia Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted by popular protests in Kiev. Alarmed, Vladimir Putin dispatched special forces to stir up unrest among the pro-Russian elements on the Crimean Peninsula. These 'little green men' quickly overwhelmed the local government, put pro-Russian separatists into power, and held a fraudulent 'election' in which the region voted to be annexed by Russia. Aggression from Russia didn't end there. To date, roughly [13,000 Ukrainian forces](#) have been killed by Russian troops or Russian-backed separatists that occupy the Donbas Region in southeast Ukraine.

Despite these acts of hostility, Russia's foreign policy has failed to isolate Ukraine from the West or to put a permanent stop to the expansion of the EU and NATO. Thus, Putin's latest actions can be seen through the lens of a desperate attempt to reverse [Russia's declining influence in Eastern Europe](#). As his options for doing so dwindle, there is a more and more serious threat that he will resort to force.

International Actors

Other countries in the region have been implicated by Russia's recent actions. Russia has deployed massive military resources to Belarus, whose president, Alexander Lukashenko, has become increasingly reliant on Russia's support as he tries to maintain his grip on power despite civilian unrest. It is not clear how long the troops will be stationed there, but Belarus has clearly fallen into Russia's friendly orbit, a clearly problematic development in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

For Germany, complex political, historical, and economic factors have led to the country facing an [acute dilemma](#) in its relations with Russia. Germany is the biggest importer of Russian natural gas in the world, and about half of its supply runs through pipelines which pass through Ukraine. As natural gas prices rise, its ready availability is surely on the minds of German policymakers. Despite these high costs for punitive action, Germany appears ready to support its western allies' efforts at deterrence, with Chancellor Scholz promising in his recent visit to the White House that Germany would remain aligned with the United States.

Moreover, China and Russia [released a joint statement](#) during a visit by Vladimir Putin for the Winter Olympics that included agreement on opposing further NATO expansion. The statement also accused NATO of espousing Cold War ideology, expressed concern over the AUKUS security pact, and said Russia supports Beijing's One China policy. "There are no forbidden areas of cooperation," the statement reads, according to a translation by the Kremlin. Were Russia to move to military action, it is unlikely that China would follow suit but would probably seek to maintain a kind of 'benevolent neutrality' by alleviating the impact of Western sanctions on Russia.



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Predictions for the Future

The buildup of Russian military forces in and around Ukraine should not be cause for immediate panic or alarm, but it does raise concerns given the potential for large-scale military action. As Russia presses outrageous demands upon the US and NATO, the ongoing diplomatic dialogue does not seem to be meeting with success thus far.

Russia's goals in this crisis are multifaceted. On one hand, Putin wants to maintain strategic influence in Ukraine and shape Ukraine's domestic policies. However, as the US tries to make a pivot to China and the Asia-Pacific, Russia sees the present moment as an opportune time to address a more essential issue regarding the geopolitical landscape in Europe, like the halting of NATO enlargement and rolling back defense cooperation between NATO members and Ukraine. Putin's specific demand is that NATO's military presence and infrastructure be reverted to pre-1997 lines, but this is a non-starter already rejected by the alliance.

It is also possible that a strictly Ukrainian solution could still solve the problem. Putin has backed a separatist movement in the country's east for years, which has claimed thousands of lives and ground to a bloody stalemate. The Minsk Agreement intended to lay out a path to de-escalation and greater autonomy for the region, but neither Kyiv nor Moscow have shown signs of honoring this bargain. Thus, a potential mechanism to calm tensions could be to solve the issues in separatist-occupied regions of Ukraine, though this would be only a partial resolution of Russia's demands.

The US has proposed an expanded strategic stability dialogue as an alternative. This would expand existing bilateral talks to address some of Russia's other concerns, including missile basing in Europe, regional arms control, proposals for de-escalation, and the scope of NATO exercises. However, the US has also prepared several threats to serve as deterrents, which would most immediately come in the form of serious economic sanctions.



In the end, it is not clear whether or not Russia will take military action. However, even if it did, NATO would not be obliged to come to Ukraine's defense, as the nation is not a fully fledged member of the alliance and thus is not covered by the mutual defense guarantees of Article V. It is true that the US has been providing Ukraine with military equipment—and that other NATO allies might do the same. Overall, war with Russia is not desired by NATO members, leaving severe sanctions as the most likely deterrent.

As Russia continues to subvert Ukraine's political system through cyberattacks, pro-Russian ideology, and disinformation, U.S. aid and active diplomacy with Ukraine is increasingly essential. If the United States' goal is to maintain a free and democratic Ukraine, aid should go beyond military support and extend to economic and institutional support, including implementing reforms and anti-corruption efforts that have been needed in the Ukrainian political system.

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