



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

WHITE PAPER SERIES

The Russia-Ukraine Crisis: Background, Current Situation,
Outlook

January 2022

INTENT

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The Russia-Ukraine Crisis: Background, Current Situation, Outlook

Introduction

In October 2021, long-simmering tensions between Russia and Ukraine began to reignite following a Russian military buildup near Ukraine's border and related provocations. These tensions have also garnered significant international attention due to the potential for a Russian invasion as well as the ensuing Ukrainian and international response (to include a potential NATO response). This paper will explore the historical background that led to the current crisis, summarize the status of the current crisis, provide insight into Russia's potential courses of action, and provide an outlook for the implications of the current crisis regardless of which course of action Russia ultimately opts for.

Background

The history surrounding Russia and Ukraine is long and complicated. As with any long-standing geopolitical interest, capturing these nuances and historical sentiments is challenging but necessary in providing context for current tensions between the two countries. From the 9th to 13th century, the first East Slavic state Kievan Rus encompassed a massive area, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. This includes modern day Russia and Ukraine. After the nation fell to Mongol invaders, the region now known as Ukraine was divided between nations seeking the fertile soil of the region. The Crimean Peninsula was part of the Ottoman empire at the time.¹ However, by the end of the 18th century, Imperial Russia controlled a majority of Ukraine, excepting Galicia in the southwest.² In the 19th century, Imperial Russia took steps to eliminate nationalism in Ukraine, including banning the use of Ukrainian language in schools.³

The first independent Ukrainian state was founded in 1918, as the Russian Empire collapsed after World War I. However, the nation was shortly thereafter invaded by Poland and was fought over with the new Bolshevik government (new to power following Russia's 1918 revolution). In 1921, most of Ukraine was integrated into the Soviet Union, excepting the western portion which was part of Poland. In 1939, western Ukraine is annexed by the Soviet Union. In the 1930's, Stalin ordered mass executions in the region following Ukrainian refusal to join collective farms. He also deported approximately 200,000 Tatars (the native population of the Crimean Peninsula) to Siberia and Central Asia. These executions and an ongoing famine killed approximately 10 million people. To repopulate the region, Stalin brought in ethnic Russians in the late 1930's to early 1940's. In 1941 Nazi forces invaded Ukraine. Initially, Ukrainians saw this invading force as a liberator, and fought with them against the Soviets. However, when the Nazi forces began using Ukrainians as slave labor, 2.5 million Ukrainians switched sides and began fighting for the Soviets. At least 5.3 million Ukrainians died during World War II. Following accusations of cooperation with Nazi force, Stalin deported and executed tens of thousands of Ukrainians.³ Following Stalin's death, in 1954 the Soviet premier transferred Crimea to Ukraine. This transfer appears to have been motivated in part by the premier's hopes to appease Ukrainian leaders and solidify his own power.



In the 1960's, opposition to Soviet rule grew. Dissidents were repressed in 1972.² In the 1980's and 90's, Crimean Tatars began returning to their ancestral homes.¹

Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union following a 1991 vote. A democratic constitution was adopted in 1996. However, Russia continued to attempt to influence politics in the country. In 2002, the Ukrainian government announced its intention to apply to join NATO. In 2004, the Russian government backed pro-Russian presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych. Massive fraud occurred in the election, and led by opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko, mass protests overturned the election. This was known as the Orange Revolution. A re-run of the election the following year saw Yushchenko elected.² However, Yanukovych later came to power in 2010. That same year, Ukrainian parliament voted to abandon aims for NATO membership. After suddenly cancelling a trade deal with the European union in 2013, tens of thousands of protests gathered, accusing Yanukovych of caving to Russian pressure. At least 77 of these protestors were killed by security forces in 2014, and Yanukovych fled to Russia. This was known as the Revolution of Dignity. The following month, Russian forced annexed the Crimea Peninsula. In spring of 2014, Petro Poroshenko won the presidential election, running with a pro-Western platform.

In the fall of 2014, NATO announced that Russian forces had entered eastern Ukraine.³ Russia claims justification for the action by assertions that Crimea is populated primary by ethnic Russians. About a quarter of the Ukrainian population identifies Russian as their mother tongue. A month after forces entered the Crimea Peninsula, Ukrainian parliamentary elections were held and resulted in a strong majority of pro-Western parties. In February of 2015, a ceasefire was negotiated in Belarus. In 2017, the association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union was ratified and came into effect. The following year, a bridge was opened by Russia, connecting Russia and Crimea, despite Ukrainian objections on legality. The next presidential election in 2019 saw Poroshenko lose to Volodymyr Zelensky.³ Peace talks were held again and a ceasefire was agreed to be implemented by the end of the year. Despite having over 20 earlier ceasefire agreements, the United Nations estimated at least 13,000 people had died in the conflict between 2014 and 2019, highlighting the ongoing clashes that regularly occur.⁴ More Russian troops and military hardware were deployed in spring of 2021 to the Crimea region for military exercises. Though number of troops were reduced shortly thereafter, they rose dramatically over the rest of the year.

Current Situation (2021-Present)

The following section will detail the current Russia-Ukraine crisis which began in early 2021, escalating around October-November 2021, with tensions, military activities, and diplomatic discussions ongoing as of mid-January 2022.

Land, Air, and Sea Buildup

Russian troops began amassing at Ukraine's eastern border in April 2021, supposedly to participate in military exercises. When confronted that month, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov assumed a defensive posture. He suggested that Russia might need to prepare for an increased NATO presence in the region or even U.S. troops in Ukraine.⁵ World leaders fear that Russia's stance is merely a pretense for an invasion. However, the window for an invasion is limited. Ukraine's



winter temperatures freeze the ground, allowing for the movement of vehicles and equipment. The spring thaw in March will put mud in path of Russian forces, making an invasion logistically difficult.⁶

A mild Ukrainian winter has, thus far, slowed the freeze, possibly delaying movement of ground forces. Additional Russian troops were expected to augment the existing forces at the Ukrainian border in December and early January, culminating in 175,000 personnel. Troop movements have actually slowed, but there are still 100,000 personnel that make up 60 battalion tactical groups, along with additional attack aircraft and movement of other assets into Crimea and Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Those regions form a territory called Donbas, which is under the control of separatists backed by the Kremlin. Russia has denied the presence of its ground forces there, but Ukraine's government acknowledges the territory as "temporarily occupied."^{6, 7}

Russia has also renewed and upgraded its Black Sea Fleet since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The fleet held drills in November 2021 with 20 surface vessels performing joint live-fire operations with submarines, planes, helicopters, and minesweeping units.⁸

Cyberattacks and Disinformation

Russia used extensive cyber operations in the weeks leading up to the 2014 invasion of Crimea to destabilize the Ukrainian government's response.⁹ The attacks have continued since then, including a December 2015 strike that blacked out the power to more than 225,000 people in the cold of winter.¹⁰ Russian hackers may attempt to cripple infrastructure in Ukraine before and during an invasion, as they did in 2008 during the invasion of Georgia. Denial-of-service attacks crippled several government websites there.¹¹ On 14 January 2022, it was reported that Ukrainian government agencies (to include the ministry of foreign affairs, cabinet of ministers, and security and defense council) were hit by a suspected Russian cyberattack, with some experts noting a similarity to the aforementioned pre-invasion cyber activity targeting Georgia.¹²

Russia-linked TV channels, newspapers and social media sites have already initiated a campaign of propaganda and disinformation intended to legitimize a potential takeover in the international community and to curry favor among Ukrainian citizens.¹³ In reality, the campaign stretches back to 2014. It has portrayed the post-revolutionary government as fascistic, antisemitic, xenophobic, and racist.¹⁴ There is also a contingent of Ukrainians who favor reunification with Russia, mostly concentrated in the southeastern portion of the country. Disinformation may be intended to bolster sentiment among them and persuade citizens elsewhere that may be less committed to western cooperation.

Internal and External Motivations

The broadest view of Russia's actions towards Ukraine is a simple question of maintaining or regaining its Cold War sphere of influence. Ukraine was a Soviet country, and it has historic cultural, economic, and social ties to Russia. Crimea itself was part of Russia until Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred the region to Ukraine in 1954. But much has changed since then.¹⁵

Since 1999, NATO has continued to add former Soviet bloc countries to its ranks. It has expressed its intentions of adding Georgia and Ukraine in the future. Putin has interpreted these actions as a hostile expansion by NATO and an encroachment on Russian interests. Prior to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, then-President Yanukovich scrapped a plan to foster closer economic ties with the European Union, leading to widespread protests. The cancelation of the plan was seen as a concession to Moscow. Prior to the invasion of Crimea, Russia had hoped for Ukraine to join its Eurasian Economic Union, which confers a unified set of free trade protocols among its member states; Ukrainian ports in Mariupol and Berdyansk, on the Sea of Azov, are known for their steel, grain, and coal exports.¹⁹ Now, China trades more with Ukraine than Russia. Russia is also contracted to continue moving gas through Ukraine for several years, despite the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline under the Baltic Sea to Germany. This means continuing to pay transit fees to Kyiv. Moscow very likely sees its power in Ukraine dissipating in the face of Western influences.¹⁵

Short-Term Outlook

In July, October, and December of 2021, Russia conducted hypersonic missile tests.¹⁶ Satellite imagery has showed the buildup of forces at three (3) sites in Crimea. One site was augmented with a new brigade-level unit, made up of hundreds of BMP-series infantry fighting vehicles, tanks, self-propelled artillery, and air defense equipment.¹⁷ Vladimir Putin has asserted that the West can avoid war with immediate security guarantees regarding Russian interests in the region. When confronted about the buildups in the west and in Crimea, Peskov stated that Russia has the right to move troops and assets within its own borders in response to mounting hostilities.¹⁶



Figure 1
Russian Troop Deployments as of 7 January

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov recently told Russian Television International (RTVI) that, while the Kremlin is open to diplomacy, recent talks with the U.S. in Geneva and NATO in Brussels had broken down. The U.S. has said it is willing to discuss arms control, missile



deployments, and confidence-building measures. Preventing Ukraine from joining NATO is non-negotiable. Similarly, Russia has stated that it is unwilling to draw down forces at the border and in Crimea.¹⁸ It is easy to dismiss Russia's escalation as posturing meant as a diplomatic bargaining chip. In 2014, it annexed Crimea amid protests from the international community. Going back further, in 2008, Russia recognized the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following its war with Georgia, despite their home government's insistence that the areas are only occupied territories. Similar to the occupied regions of Ukraine, Russia has provided citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia¹⁹, further expanding Russian influence in the region. Both Russia's present actions and its recent history provide potential indications as to what Russia's true intent may be in the current situation.

On 14 January 2022, the U.S. claimed to have intelligence that Russian provocateurs in Ukraine were potentially preparing to carry out "false flag"-style activities in order to lay a pretext for a Russian invasion.²⁰ This could potentially be related to the 10 January arrest of an alleged Russian agent in Odessa whose reported mission was "to shake up the political situation in the Odessa region through sabotage and terrorist acts."²¹

Potential Russian Courses of Action

Though the situation remains fluid at the time of writing, Russia has a variety of potential courses of action available with regards to Ukraine. While the following sub-sections are examples of potential courses of action, they should not be considered a comprehensive or exhaustive list of potential Russian courses of action.

Course of Action #1: Posturing, Gaining Influence

Russia may seek to continue small-scale provocations (to include troop movements, military exercises, and limited cyber/information operations in order to highlight its capabilities to conduct more significant actions against Ukraine. Russia's willingness to engage in such activities in defiance of international opposition may signal to Russia's neighbors that it is willing to take military and geopolitical actions in order to maintain and expand its influence.

Course of Action #2: Continue Diplomatic Dialogue

Similarly, Russia could choose to continue to engage in diplomatic discussions with international partners to include the U.S. and decrease its provocative activities. The threat of sanctions or other punitive measures could potentially persuade Russia to temper its aggressive actions directed toward Ukraine. However, the recent history of provocations has shown this course of action to be relatively unlikely.

Course of Action #3: Military Invasion

More concerningly, Russia may seek to conduct a military invasion (to include widespread cyber/information operations. This may be contained to the Crimea region, or, alternatively, to other regions of Ukraine. Russian military invasion may be precluded by preparation of the battlespace, to include increased cyber/information operations, special operations, and pre-invasion activities such as airstrikes. The invasion would likely consist of military actions from land, air, and sea, supported by cyberspace and information operations.



Course of Action #4: Repeat Ukraine Model Against Other Neighbors

If Russia ultimately views any of the aforementioned courses of action as successful and/or beneficial, Russia may seek to repeat the actions it has conducted toward Ukraine against other neighboring countries where Russia maintains interests or seeks influence, to include a number of former Soviet States, in which Russia has lost its influence and authority.

Most Likely Course of Action/Most Dangerous Course of Action

RMC analysts assess that in the near-term Russia will most likely continue to pursue small-scale provocations in order to posture and gain influence, in line with Course of Action #1 detailed above. These actions likely consist of continued cyber and information operations against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, government entities, and the civilian population. These types of actions have the potential to weaken the will of the local populace and destabilize the established Ukrainian government in order to create more opportunity for Russian advances and “land grabbing,” similar to the already occupied portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Eastern Ukraine. They also serve as catalyst actions that can draw more international forces into Ukraine, therefore allowing Russia to continue to claim the West is encroaching on its sovereign borders and it is simply defending itself from “Western aggression”. There is low confidence in this assessment primarily due to gaps in open source reporting providing true insight on Russian political objectives behind its current actions and the absence of publicly available, clearly defined intent behind Russian military movement.

RMC analysts also assess that a Russian full scale military invasion of Ukraine is the most dangerous course of action, as it would likely entail a NATO response and the potential for an international military response and potential ongoing hostilities – particularly if the Russian aim is to conduct a large-scale campaign to annex all of Ukraine, similar to Crimea in 2014. Per a report by the Congressional Research Service, Russia seeks to establish greater control over maritime regions adjacent to Crimea and eastern Ukraine, including in the Sea of Azov; the Black Sea; and the Kerch Strait, which connects the two seas. As examined above, past Russian actions have already included the annexation of Crimea, and military involvement in separatist fighting in Eastern Ukraine. Additionally, open source reporting indicates current Russian military maneuvers into and within the region could potentially support this most dangerous course of action with an incursion into the areas adjacent to the Sea of Azov. Further this region maintains geopolitical importance as it’s the final barrier to Russia laying claim to all of the land, and associated ports, accessing the Sea.

Outlook

Russia’s current posture regarding Ukraine situation remains fluid, and it is difficult to predict the ultimate short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes related to Ukraine. In the 24 hours leading up to the final production of this paper, Russia had launched an apparent cyberattack against Ukrainian government entities, and has been accused by the U.S. of planning “false flag” provocations to justify an invasion. RMC’s analysts assess that Russia’s most likely course of action will be the continuation of various provocations (to include military, cyber, and information



operations), at a minimum. RMC's analysts also assess that a Russian military invasion (with corresponding cyber/information operations) remains the most dangerous course of action.

Should Russia perceive its actions toward Ukraine as successful, it may seek to repeat such actions against other neighboring countries. Russia has sought to re-establish its influence in former Soviet states. Should Russia engage in such activity, it could potentially invite a robust NATO/international response, increasing the potential for widespread conflict. Moreover, real or perceived Russian success in Ukraine may serve as a signal to other U.S. adversaries such as China, given the U.S. alliance with Ukraine. If Russia's aggression proves successful despite U.S. objections and attempted diplomacy (or, alternatively, if the U.S. chooses not to enact a military response), China may seek to emulate aspects of Russia's Ukraine model against its own disputed territories, such as Taiwan and entities in the South China Sea.

The current Russia-Ukraine tensions also have implications for DoD installations in the U.S. European Command Area of Responsibility (EUCOM AOR), to include Marine Corps Prepositioning Program-Norway (a major logistics hub) and Naval Support Facility Deveselu (a shore-based Aegis missile defense facility). Russian military posturing and exercises may force DoD installations in the EUCOM AOR to increase readiness and maintain a more proactive posture, in order to counter any potential Russian military activities. If Russia were to pursue kinetic military actions, additional DoD installations (such as those in Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain) would likely experience similar impacts (up to and including mobilization/combat deployment). Russian aggression in Eastern Europe has also raised concerns amongst other U.S. allies, with countries such as Lithuania and Poland courting a sustained DoD presence.^{22, 23}

RMC's Intelligence & Analysis Division continues to monitor the situation between Russia and Ukraine as it unfolds and will provide relevant updates as necessary.

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