

Ukraine in the crosshairs

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The Russian military has massed more than 125,000 troops along the Ukrainian border, together with the heavy artillery necessary for an invasion of the country. Why have simmering tensions reached a boiling point yet again? In part, the answer relates to Ukraine's unique position in European affairs.

Ukraine is the second largest European state by land area, and, along with Belarus, is a buffer between Russia and US-aligned European countries. The US and its Western allies have long recognised that Ukraine is the key to “containing” Russia. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to US President Jimmy Carter, noted in his 1998 book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* that Ukraine’s “very existence as an independent country [means] Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire”.

Historically, Russia benefited militarily from its distance from hostile forces approaching from its west. But the eastern expansion of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance of European states under US leadership, has drastically reduced Russia’s breathing space as the West has attempted to reduce permanently Moscow’s sphere of influence.

While its position as Russia’s largest western neighbour is central, influence over Ukraine’s economy is also of importance. Ukraine was the industrial and agricultural centre of the Soviet Union. It remains Europe’s breadbasket and one of the globe’s largest agricultural producers and exporters, particularly of grain and corn. The country also has some of the largest and most diverse mineral reserves in the world. According to the US Geological Survey, Ukraine ranks seventh largest in the world as a producer of iron ore, eighth largest of manganese, sixth largest of titanium, seventh of graphite and ninth of uranium. According to the World Steel Association, it is the world’s tenth largest steel producer.

In the 21st century, there has been something of a permanent tug of war over Ukraine. The dramatic escalation of recent times is the result of two factors. The first is that the country has, since 2014, signed economic agreements drawing it closer to the EU (and therefore to the US), rather than to Russia. Its government reportedly plans to apply for EU membership in 2024 and hopes to join in the 2030s. Its integration further into the military, political and economic spheres of the West would be a crushing blow for Russian imperialism and a blow to President Vladimir Putin’s reputation. Moscow, not without reason, views the ever-growing military and economic alliance of European states to its west as a direct threat.

NATO, established in 1949, was sold as a “defensive” alliance to protect Western democracy from the threats of German and Russian authoritarianism. But it was a means to advance the United States’ imperialist interests in Europe and to prevent its member states from shifting to the left politically. This was particularly important in states with mass Communist parties such as France, Italy and later Greece. When the Soviet regime collapsed in 1991, the US pressed its advantage and punished its Cold War rival. President Bill Clinton expanded NATO into a host of ex-Soviet satellite countries. The expansion has continued, the alliance more than doubling its original twelve members

to 30 states.

It's little wonder the eastern expansion of its Western rivals is viewed as an existential threat by the Kremlin, as its sphere of immediate influence has been whittled to Belarus, Kazakhstan and eastern Ukraine. Moscow's most recent demand is for NATO to remove all forces from Bulgaria, Romania and other ex-Soviet states that joined the alliance after 1997. Those calls have gone unheeded, so Putin is sending a message that he wants no further growth in the number of states nominally aligned against Russia, and that he's prepared to use force to make the point—as he did with the invasion of Georgia in 2008.

The second factor enabling the recent escalation is that Putin believes that the balance of forces in Europe and with respect to US imperialism presents a number of reasons to push on Ukraine. Partly due to export revenues from its colossal oil and gas reserves, Russia has stabilised its economy and expanded its military capacity. Putin, who has ruled the country since 2000, is confident that his military would overpower its European rivals in any contest. Russia being the supplier of 40 percent of Europe's oil and gas also gives Moscow significant economic leverage.

In its assessment of the US, Russia finds more reasons to push. The broader international situation over the last fifteen years has highlighted a series of US weaknesses and preoccupations that potentially prevent it from intervening effectively to stop Russia militarily. US President Joe Biden's Afghanistan exit was a global embarrassment and indicative of a US empire in relative decline. The pivot to Asia has not delivered tangible gains for Washington in its competition with Beijing. COVID-19 has run rampant through the US, and the Senate remains an immovable obstacle to Biden's domestic agenda.

With the US appearing weakened, with the EU devoid of the military means to challenge Russia and remaining dependent on its energy reserves, Putin sees a chance to win major concessions from the West over Ukraine, or simply to create facts on the ground.

Or course, Russia and the West are not the only players in this conflict. What do Ukrainians want? The country has been split by a long history of imperialist warring and meddling in the region. Deep divisions have been sown through every level of Ukrainian society, along "red lines" that separate the east of the country from the west. In the west, where the horrors of Stalinism left a lasting anti-communist legacy, very few people speak Russian and most desire closer ties with the EU. In the east, there are more Russian speakers, many of whom identify primarily with their Russian roots. Both Russia and the West have tried to stoke this division to make sections of the population more amenable to their interests.

The divisions exploded into mass movements beginning in the early 2000s. In 2004, claims of electoral fraud prompted protests rejecting the victory of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych. Outrage against the election results exploded in the "Orange Revolution". Mass protests prevented Yanukovych taking office and brought to the fore the country's first explicitly pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko, who pushed for EU and NATO membership. The country's internal divisions deepened as the eastern and southern pro-Russian populations felt discriminated against by the new government and its supporters.

Yet Yushchenko failed to lift Ukraine's poor economic performance and eventually fell out of favour. In 2010, Yanukovych returned and won an election deemed fair by local and international authorities. Despite his traditional ties to Russia, Yanukovych eyed relations with the EU and sought loans from the International Monetary Fund. But Putin turned the screws, and Yanukovych swung back towards Moscow, opting to sign on to the Eurasian Economic Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The union was a means for Russia to integrate and influence its immediate

neighbours.

Yanukovych's new alignment with Putin was the catalyst for the massive Euromaidan protests of 2013. The protesters were primarily students hoping for a post-Soviet economic future and an alternative to the corruption of the Ukrainian elites. They continued to look away from Russia towards the liberal capitalism of the West and ties with the EU. Demonstrations of tens of thousands were transformed by police repression into demonstrations of hundreds of thousands. These protests ousted Yanukovych, who fled to Moscow. A provisional government was installed, and pro-Western President Petro Poroshenko was elected in 2014.

The Euromaidan movement sparked a counter-movement in the pro-Russian sections of eastern Ukraine. Insurgents in the Donbas region took up arms against the government. From the beginning, the resistance was influenced and purportedly resourced by the Kremlin. Divisions were deepened when the Ukrainian government enlisted the help of fascist groups to combat the insurgents after the national armed forces became increasingly disillusioned. Russia responded not only by fostering this anti-Maidan insurgency in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but also by invading and annexing Crimea, an important port in the Black Sea and a long-coveted jewel for Russian chauvinists. The Donbas war has continued to ravage the east. More than 14,000 have been killed and 1 million displaced. The divisions between east and west continue to shape and be shaped by the current imperialist conflict.

For most Ukrainians, then, the future appears bleak. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country has found no respite from economic strife and political crisis. According to government statistics, the average worker earns about A\$700 a month, while local oligarch Rinat Akhmetov increased his wealth to \$8.5 billion last year. Imperialist intrigue has divided the population and continues to drag them further apart in the contest for influence. A Russian invasion would compound the misery. Yet the promise of a better life through further integration into Western Europe's imperialist bloc is just so much snake oil for all except a small minority in the country.

In a classic case of brinkmanship, Romania and Bulgaria have been provided additional military support from NATO. So with tensions running high, the US instinct is to nudge them up a notch further, as it has been doing for decades in the region. These provocations only increase the risk of war, the outcome of which could be thousands dead and millions displaced. But as we've seen time and again from the leaders of both power blocs, that's a price they seem all too willing for others to pay.

Zak Borzovoy

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