



Making sense of the new Ukraine-Russia crisis

Expert briefing

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BACKGROUND

The growing confrontation between Western governments and Russia centring on Ukraine has emerged as one of the most pressing security challenges of the moment. But commentary and analysis around the issue are markedly varied, with some predicting imminent moves by Russian forces and others resolute in their view that this is mere posturing by Vladimir Putin – or, perhaps, an attempt by the Russian leader to force a new vision of European security on Western governments.

Who is right? Is Russia's very strategy to keep us guessing? An [online panel](#) discussion was held by UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) on 3 February 2022, bringing together a distinguished panel of experts to help make sense of what is happening, how we have got to where we are – and what might happen next. This briefing document summarises the main points made by the panellists.

RUSSIA'S RED LINES

Oksana Antonenko – Control Risks

KEY POINT Putin has learned to gamble and play the American “red-line strategy” – a low-cost approach that is effective in causing instability, as well as bringing the Russian president to the “top table” of international politics. Putin has sanction-proofed the Russian economy and has succeeded in setting the new European security agenda, even if he has failed to secure NATO's commitment not to accept Ukraine as a member in the future.

1. Putin has been matching the Biden administration's red-line strategy. At the Geneva Summit, the US engaged in open and frank dialogue, clearly articulating the country's red lines. Now, Russia's actions can be understood as drawing their own red lines. Putin prefers to play judo rather than chess when it comes to his security policy, focusing on identifying and exploiting weaknesses of the other side, even without a well-thought-out strategy of his own.
2. Despite the Russian troop build-up on the Ukrainian border – which began last year just after President Biden's inauguration – the West has held its nerve; there has been no fundamental

compromise, Ukraine remains on the potential NATO member list, and the US and Europe have largely presented a united front.

3. The imminence of invasion and severity of threat have, however, been overblown by the US. In reality, Russia is in no position to launch a full-scale invasion, but the perceived threat has allowed Putin to secure a number of concessions without firing a single shot. Substantial security benefits to Putin include, but are not limited to, increased transparency about US missile defence sites in Poland and Romania, as well as discussions about the non-deployment of weapons in Ukraine, a resumption of NATO's dialogue with Russia on European security (beyond Russia's actions in Ukraine), and a resumption of strategic arms control negotiations with the US.
4. The question for the West now is whether the threat of invasion is enough for Putin to achieve all his aims or whether he will escalate the situation in order to obtain more concessions. The crisis is likely to be a prolonged one because Putin can afford to keep troops at the border with Ukraine for a long period of time, thus applying significant pressure on Ukraine's economy and keeping European gas prices high.

military is genuinely prepared for war, giving Putin space for manoeuvring. Additionally, there is uncertainty as to what Putin is being told by his Kremlin advisors in terms of the Ukrainian attitude towards the situation.

1. Putin and the Kremlin view NATO as an anti-Russian agency. The pressure on Ukraine is, therefore, deeply connected to Putin's wish for a new European security architecture; NATO bases and missiles in Ukraine pose an unacceptable security threat.
2. Putin is thinking about his legacy and wants something tangible to present as a substantial achievement. He is a 19th century geopolitician who wants to have a sphere of influence and is against Ukrainian sovereignty. The West should, therefore, engage in continuous, regular dialogue with the Russians and potentially allow them a number of minor concessions to be "wrapped up in shiny paper" for Putin to present to the Russian people as wins. He may recognise the Luhansk and Donetsk pseudo-states, which could be presented as a victory in terms of uniting and protecting ethnic Russians. However, what shape these achievements will ultimately take is unknown even to Putin, let alone anyone else.
3. Russia's military is genuinely prepared for war. However, bombing Ukrainian cities is not a politically viable option and neither is invading and occupying them; the human and economic cost for Russia would be too high and there appears to be limited domestic support for this.
4. Putin has built a situation where he has multiple options – and he can always change his mind.

UNCERTAINTY ABOUT WHAT PUTIN WANTS

Professor Mark Galeotti – UCL SSEES

KEY POINT No one can be sure what Putin wants, because he himself is not certain. At the same time, Putin appears to be concerned with building a substantial legacy and racking up achievements to show for his time in power. What is certain is that Russia's

KYIV'S STRATEGY

Orysia Lutsevych – Chatham House

KEY POINT The real threat to Russia is being excluded from the table of superpowers, meaning the core issue for Putin is much broader than the question of Ukraine. Additionally, there is fear concerning Putin's succession and legacy, as well as the potential disintegration of Russia: the thinking of the country's leadership is "if you don't expand, you shrink".

1. Russia's desire to create a buffer zone around itself stems from the leadership's ingrained anxiety about the strength of the country itself. Russia's wider regional interests are demonstrated by a military build-up in the Black Sea, cyber-attacks on Kyiv, and the build-up of military bases in Belarus, which all create pressure on NATO's fringes. Russia's military posture is aimed at compelling the US to reconsider its presence in Europe and its role in supporting countries such as Ukraine.
2. Kyiv's strategy is based on diplomacy, deterrence, and determination. The diplomatic strategy is driven by long-term objectives regarding the safe reintegration of the Donbas region and establishing negotiations concerning Crimea, as well as creating a security umbrella that protects Ukraine's sovereignty. Regarding deterrence, following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian economy has fully reorientated itself towards Europe and away from Russia. Although this was a shock to many businesses, most have adapted well. In this crisis, Ukraine has also received economic assistance from the EU, the UK, and the IMF.
3. In terms of determination, Kyiv has demonstrated an incredible resilience in defending the right to determine its

future, regardless of Western actions. Security is increasingly viewed as a total defence concept, incorporating the whole of society – not just holding state agencies responsible for security but including the private sector and citizens. The Ukrainian public's willingness to get involved is high: more than 24% claim they are ready to defend with arms, and 30% say they would volunteer to help the armed forces.

4. Putin believes that where there is chaos there is opportunity. Therefore, it is in Putin's interest to continuously destabilise the Ukrainian economy, while avoiding settlement on the Donbas region, as this would formalise Russia's status as an occupying agent, whilst diminishing the Kremlin's leverage to use conflict for concessions.

HEGEMONS AND SOVEREIGNTY

Professor Andrew Wilson – UCL SSEES

KEY POINT Russia views international relations in terms of hegemons subordinating "limited sovereignty states". This view shapes Russia's attitude towards its sphere of influence, particularly regarding smaller post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus.

1. The Kremlin's current method (referred to in Russian as *kombinatsiya*) involves applying pressure on all fronts, observing the results, and, from there, deciding on further action. Although Putin may have had an initial plan, it does not mean he knows what he will do next. This will depend on where he can gain the most advantage.

2. The philosophy of Carl Schmitt appears to have an influence on Russian foreign policy. Russia is concerned with the “big space” in which Russia is the “hegemon” for its “civilisation”: the post-Soviet space. Hegemons have full sovereignty and are equal to other civilisational hegemons but are superior to the other states within their “großraum”. These states have “limited sovereignty” and are subordinate to the hegemon. The hegemon seeks to keep out powers that are outside of the “großraum”. Russia views the Ukrainian idea as “small” and, therefore, subordinate to the Russian “larger” idea. Putin’s history essay from 2021 suggests that the Ukrainian idea is artificial, created by others around it. Therefore, the idea of Ukraine as a state undermines the big Russian idea.
3. Russia wants “Yalta II”, hegemon-to-hegemon dialogue, and for the West to acknowledge that the Ukrainian idea is small and the existence of the Ukrainian state is an infringement on the Russian “großraum”. Russia wants reflexive control: to be able to decide what Ukraine is able to do or not do, and how Ukraine is viewed and talked about in the world. Russia wants the West to accept Russia’s virtual reality – its own terms of the debate. It’s a big agenda, but we should be clear about Russia’s fundamental opposition to the existence of Ukraine.