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Why Russia-Ukraine Tensions Are So Hard to Defuse

Andrew Langley and Tony Halpin | Bloomberg

Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula ignited the tensest standoff between Moscow and the West since the Cold War. The region remains deadlocked, following years of conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists in the country's east. Since November, the U.S. has been warning European allies that Russia may be preparing to invade Ukraine, already massing 100,000 troops near its neighbor's border in a re-run of a crisis in April.

1. What's sparked the flare up?

The U.S. began raising the alarm with European Union nations about a buildup of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine, later sharing intelligence showing possible plans for a three-pronged invasion from Crimea, Russia and via Belarus involving as many as 175,000 combatants.

Ukraine's defense intelligence agency chief told the Military Times that a Russian assault could come by the end of January or early February. The Kremlin denied any intention to attack Ukraine, saying troop movements on its territory were an internal matter. It accused the U.S. and NATO allies of stoking tensions with naval exercises in the Black Sea.

2. Haven't we been here before?

Yes. Russia deployed troops to Crimea and its border with Ukraine in March and April amid fighting between the Ukrainian army and the Moscow-backed insurgents. Tensions subsided after U.S. President Joe Biden called his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin and offered a summit meeting that took place in June. That prompted speculation Putin had used the crisis as a means to gain Biden's attention. After news of the latest buildup emerged, Putin said in November that the U.S. and its allies were failing to take Russia's "red lines" seriously and that Moscow needed "long-term security guarantees." He accused NATO of supplying lethal weapons to Ukraine and said the alliance was waging a pressure campaign against him. Ukraine's defense minister said on a November visit to Washington that he'd asked the Pentagon for more help defending its airspace and coast.

3. Why is this still a problem?

A 2015 truce ended the bloodiest fighting of the seven-year conflict, which has claimed more than 13,000 lives. But the terms have never been fully met and a lasting resolution remains elusive. The major stumbling block remains whether Ukraine leans eastward or westward. Protesters demanded a break from the nation's Soviet past when they ousted Kremlin-backed Viktor Yanukovich in 2014. Putin justified his subsequent annexation of Crimea and support for the fighters in eastern Ukraine by saying he must defend Russian-speakers, wherever they are. Fearing encroachment, he continues to oppose goals now enshrined in Ukraine's constitution -- including EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership.

4. What has the U.S. response been?

There has been a flurry of diplomacy since early December, sparked by a video call that Biden held with Putin Dec. 7. The leaders agreed to talk again Dec. 30 at Putin's initiative and the sides plan further discussions at the start of 2022, before a Jan. 12 meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. The U.S. has warned of debilitating economic sanctions if Russia attacks, while the Kremlin says NATO expanding further east or deploying weapons in Ukraine are red lines. Foreign ministers from the Group of Seven nations warned Russia Dec. 12 to de-escalate its activities around Ukraine or face "massive consequences." People familiar with the matter said the Biden administration has pushed European Union allies to finalize a broad package of sanctions against Russian banks and energy companies that could be imposed jointly with the U.S. if necessary.

5. What's been the sticking point?

Despite Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy coming to power pledging to bring lasting peace, he has little room to maneuver. The Kremlin wants its neighbor's restive regions to gain autonomy that gives them an effective veto over major shifts in Ukraine's orientation -- namely the Western integration backed by a sizable majority of its 41 million population. But granting the regions such powers would be tantamount to political suicide for Zelenskiy, who's already struggling to tame the pandemic and meet other promises, such as curbing corruption. Putin, meanwhile, has repeatedly made clear he regards Ukraine's ambition to join NATO as an existential threat and is demanding binding security guarantees from the West to prevent it from happening. While his goals appear unrealistic, Russian diplomacy seems focused on reaching a deal with the U.S. first, undermining attempts by Germany and France to negotiate a deal.

6. What else does Russia want?

Russia demanded that NATO withdraw its forces to positions they occupied in 1997 as it set out sweeping proposals for a massive Western pullback in two draft security treaties presented to the U.S. government. Russia and all NATO states that were members in May 1997, before the first eastern European countries were invited to join the alliance, shouldn't "deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any of the other states in Europe" that were not already in place on that date, according to one of the treaties published Dec. 17 by the Foreign Ministry in Moscow. The U.S. must also pledge to bar entry to NATO for ex-Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia and refuse to make use of their military infrastructure or develop bilateral defense ties with them, according to the second treaty. On Dec. 27, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said his country isn't presenting the U.S. with any "ultimatums," but also won't accept "endless" talks on its demands for legally binding pledges.

If U.S. warnings of an invasion are borne out, it would plunge the West and Russia into the worst confrontation since the Cold War. A Russian intervention on this scale to annex territory or even to overthrow the government in Kyiv would represent the most serious challenge to European security in decades, dwarfing the crisis triggered by Putin's takeover of Crimea and the unrestrained fighting that characterized the eastern Ukrainian conflict's earlier days. Russia's five-day war with Georgia, another former Soviet republic that turned its gaze to the West, began in a similar fashion in 2008 and ended in effective annexation of rebel areas by Moscow.

8. What can the West do about it?

The U.S., EU and U.K. have in recent years imposed several rounds of sanctions targeting Russian individuals and companies, hitting the country's energy and banking sectors. While Russia downplays their impact, its economy has stagnated and its officials have pushed to have the punishments revoked. Other potential measures include targeting Russian billionaires, or making further efforts to derail the new Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline between Russia and Germany.

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Use Wikipedia to briefly define the following from the article. Focus on what makes the term important (Do this as a journal entry):

People: Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, Sergei Lavrov, Joe Biden

Things: NATO, Nord Stream 2, sanctions

Places to locate on your maps: Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Georgia (not the American state), NATO members, Crimea, Black Sea, Donbas

List two questions you have about the content of the article (not vocabulary).