

SECURITY STRATEGY



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DOWN TO THE WIRE

The blow-by-blow of Europe's ongoing crisis in Ukraine

BY DMITRI TRENIN

1 The current crisis in Russia-West relations is not primarily about Ukraine, but essentially about the architecture of European security. Russian President Vladimir Putin's current goal is not to take over Ukraine or wrestle it back to the Russian sphere of influence. Rather, it is to replace the post-Cold War system, which is dominated by the United States and managed through NATO with a construct that rests on two pillars, the US/West and Russia, and is regulated by agreements between the two.

2 Russia has been unhappy about the US politico-military dominance in Europe since at least the mid-late 1990s, when the NATO enlargement process got underway, and NATO interfered in the Kosovo crisis and carried out an air war against Serbia. For a long time, Moscow was powerless to do much about it, and it entertained a hope that, having had to reluctantly accept the inclusion into NATO of Central European, Balkan and even former Soviet Baltic states, it would be able to exercise a sufficient degree of influence to prevent new Eastern European states like Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Georgia from going down the same path.

3 Of these countries, Ukraine and Belarus have been historically of vital strategic importance to Russia. Moscow considered their potential loss to the Western alliance intolerable.

4 The Ukrainian Maidan of 2014 dramatically changed the situation in Europe's east by bringing to power a coalition of pro-Western and anti-Russian elements. To President Putin, even though Russia immediately took control of Crimea and supported anti-Maidan militants in Donbass, this was the biggest strategic loss of his presidency. Since then, preventing Ukraine's membership in NATO became his last stand in matters of European security.

5 Putin essentially concluded that Western countries, above all the US, only understand the language of force. Moscow doubled down on upgrading its military capabilities. By 2018, Russia had developed an array of new weapons (hypersonic systems and others) that made the Kremlin more confident in dealing with Washington. In Putin's memorable phrase from his speech to the Russian parliament, but

addressed to the Americans, "you did not listen to us before. Listen now."

6 By early 2021, Putin had lost all expectations – which were revived after Zelensky's election – that the situation in Donbass and more generally relations with Ukraine could be resolved or managed in a direct dialogue with Kyiv. Worse, in late 2020, suspicions began to circulate in Moscow that Ukraine was planning an attack on Donbass modeled on the successful Azeri operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. To deter the Ukrainians and to send a stern message to Washington, Putin in March-April 2021 ordered the massing of Russian forces along Ukraine's borders.

7 Russia's troop demonstration got America's attention, as Putin must have calculated. US President Joe Biden invited him to a meeting in Geneva in June 2021, where the two leaders agreed to start talks on strategic stability and cyber security, but on the issue of Ukraine there was no movement. Moreover, from the Kremlin's perspective things began to deteriorate quickly: Kyiv's clampdown on Russia-friendly political figures and media outlets in Ukraine; more frequent and more daring NATO exercises in the Black Sea area; the testing of Russia's new maritime borders off Crimea by a UK frigate, and other similar developments.

8 In response, starting in October 2021, President Putin decided to apply military pressure again. The troop concentration on Ukraine's borders this time was even more impressive. Talking to Russia's senior diplomats in November 2021, Putin remarked that creating tension in the adversarial camp was helpful to Moscow's political goals. Again, this worked, up to a point. Presidents Putin and Biden spoke on the phone and had a videoconference. Biden was open to hearing out Russian security concerns. Russian diplomats passed their maximalist proposals/demands to the US and NATO in the form of draft treaties and a draft agreement. In-depth diplomatic discussion followed between Russia and the US and between Russia and NATO, as well as at the OSCE. US and Russian foreign ministers met. The US and NATO gave written responses to Russian proposals. For the first time since the downfall of the Soviet Union, the US and its allies began actually

discussing Russian concerns rather than dismissing them.

9 Yet Vladimir Putin found Western responses wanting. The core Russian demand for Ukraine to be formally excluded forever from NATO membership was predictably rejected, as was the demand of rolling back NATO's infrastructure to where it was in 1997, when Russia and NATO signed their Founding Act on relations. At the same time, Washington expressed willingness to discuss arms control issues, notably the non-deployment of INF systems in Europe, and abjured any intention of placing strike weapons or forces in a combat role in Ukraine, as well as a range of confidence building measures. In the past, Russia had advocated these measures – a moratorium on INF systems in Europe, a cap on military exercises – but the US had not been interested. Now that has changed.

10 Faced with this mixed bag of US counterproposals (the NATO response was judged in Moscow as politicized and overly ideological), the Kremlin did not immediately use the rejection of its core demands as a pretext for engaging in military measures (read: invasion of Ukraine) or taking military-related steps (read: new permanent deployments of troops and weapons). Instead, Russia continued the dialogue. French President Emmanuel Macron came to Moscow, to be followed by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Between those visits, UK foreign and defense secretaries visited Russia. Political directors of the Normandy countries – France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine – met in Paris and Berlin to discuss the implementation of the Minsk agreement on Donbass. Finally, Presidents Putin and Biden spoke again.

11 This intense top-level diplomacy was taking place against the backdrop of Russian military exercises in Belarus and the Black Sea, US troop reinforcements in Europe and White House warnings of an immediate Russian invasion of Ukraine. By mid-February 2022, the war of nerves between Russia and the US reached its culmination.

12 The future is unpredictable, but here are a few conclusions and an analytical outlook:

- Russia has been using its demonstrations of force, which

MR. PRECEDENT

What Russian intervention in Syria says about Putin

BY KRISTIN HELBERG

The West is bewildered. What is the driving force behind President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy? What are his goals and what tools is he willing to use to achieve them? To answer these questions, it would be wise to take a look back at Syria – Putin's longest, most extensive foreign intervention. Since 2011, Moscow has worked to secure the rule of Bashar al-Assad, a president beset by an armed insurgency. In doing so, Putin has restored Russia's position as a global power, succeeded the US as the force for order in the Middle East and expanded Moscow's military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean – and thus on NATO's southern flank. Tracking Putin's moves here helps us understand his potential foreign policy actions elsewhere.

Putin wants respect

The Russian president aspires to communicate at eye level with the world's most powerful leaders. He runs an empire and wants to be treated accordingly. This is precisely what he's achieved in Syria with the three instruments at his disposal: diplomatic clout, military strength and propaganda.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Moscow has held its protective hand over Assad for 11 years. Between 2011 and 2020, Russia vetoed 16 resolutions on Syria. As a result, crimes against international law committed by the Syrian regime could not be referred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Billions of dollars of UN aid, which had to be distributed in agreement with Damascus, was misused by the regime in order to consolidate its power. Ultimately, this aid benefited only those loyal to the regime.

Only the extremist-controlled province of Idlib, a refuge for millions of Assad opponents, received direct humanitarian aid from abroad – via the last of originally four cross-border aid corridors set up by the UN to supply regions outside the regime's control. This cross-border aid had to be renewed by the Security Council every six months, at which point the West would beg Putin to allow them to continue providing it. In diplomatic terms, the Kremlin leader has come a long way in Syria.

When Russia failed to stymie resolutions, it simply weakened them in such a way that its allies were protected. The best example of this is Resolution 2254 from December 2015 – the UN document to which all actors

involved in the Syria conflict still refer today. The resolution was the result of intensive talks between Moscow and Washington, which in October 2015 seized on the International Syria Contact Group as the only serious diplomatic initiative that could resolve the conflict. Both countries were already militarily engaged in Syria at the time – the US since September 2014 to fight the Islamic State group (IS), and Russia since September 2015 to rescue Assad, who had lost control of large swaths of the country. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his then-US counterpart John Kerry met at eye level – just a year and a half after President Barack Obama had degraded Russia by referring to it as a "regional power" in March 2014.

Resolution 2254 called for an end to attacks on civilians, unimpeded humanitarian access and the release of individuals arbitrarily detained. For months, Lavrov and Kerry sought de-escalation. Together, they led two negotiating groups in an attempt to contain the violence and provide humanitarian aid to the people – to no avail. The war not only continued as before, it escalated.

Russia became not only the crucial partner in this campaign, but the "game-changer" of the war. In the summer of 2015, Putin began sending troops and military equipment at Assad's request – partly in the hope that involvement in Syria would end Russia's international isolation, which was triggered a year earlier by the war in Ukraine and the earlier annexation of Crimea. Damascus granted Moscow free and unlimited use of Khmeimim Airport, which Putin then upgraded to a Russian air base.

The supply of personnel and weapons also passed through the Russian naval base in Tartus, which Moscow has maintained since 1977. It is Russia's only access to the Mediterranean Sea. In January 2017, Putin secured the rights to use the port for a virtually indefinite period; if neither partner objects, the 49 years contractually agreed upon are automatically extended for 25 years at a time. The site is of great strategic importance to Putin. It guarantees the Kremlin influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, which he needs to prevent NATO's dominance over the entire Mediterranean Sea. From Tartus, Moscow is able to pose a military threat to NATO's southern flank and thus counter the alliance's expansion.

In short, Putin leveraged his unflinching diplomacy, military determination and media manipulation to gain respect.

Putin is a tactician, not a strategist

Despite appearances, the Russian leader lacked a long-term strategy for Syria in 2011. The decision to keep Bashar al-Assad in power was a reaction to NATO's muscle-flexing in the region, particularly in Libya. In March 2011, Moscow's abstention in the UN Security Council enabled NATO's intervention in Libya. Shortly thereafter, NATO bombed Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime out of existence, even though its mission under the UN mandate had been to protect civilians. Putin was determined to prevent a repeat in Syria. After all, Assad was Moscow's last ally in the Middle East. During the 2000s, the entire region had fallen almost entirely under US influence.

Putin's plan for Damascus was thus limited to preventing Western-backed regime change. The Kremlin chief emerged as Assad's most powerful patron, making himself indispensable to all parties. Eschewing rigid calculations, Putin simply reacted to current events – the more dynamic, the better for him. Indeed, as a short-tempered tactician and autocrat, he uses every crisis to his advantage, whereas Western politicians must take public opinion into account, involve their parliaments and coordinate their actions.

As a result, in September 2013, Putin achieved his greatest tactical coup. After the August 21 poison gas attacks on the Damascus suburbs that killed more than 1,400 people, President Obama found himself under pressure to act. A year earlier, he had referred to the use of chemical weapons as a red line; now he was desperate to avoid a military strike, fearing the US could be drawn into another endless war. Putin helped him out of a tight spot. He persuaded the Syrian regime to surrender and destroy its chemical weapons stockpile through the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), providing Obama with a welcome excuse not to attack. Instead of being punished for gassing hundreds of civilians, the Assad regime became a partner, the OPCW inspectors received the Nobel Peace Prize shortly thereafter, and Putin began looking like a confident crisis manager.

Even the military buildup in Syria was not the result of any far-sighted strategy, but reflective of an ad hoc response to shifting needs. On several occasions, Putin announced that he would withdraw troops, only to then intensify and consolidate Russia's military presence.

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Down to the wire

Beleaguered: Volodymyr Zelensky

appear as preparation for an invasion, as leverage to get the US to listen to its concerns and act on its demands. This is Putin's personal diplomatic approach to the US.

- Russia's demand of NATO's non-expansion to the former Soviet space cannot be formally met, but there is no chance of Ukraine or Georgia actually making it to NATO as long as Russia regards this as a *casus belli*.

- The US agreement to negotiate a ban on the deployment of INF systems in Europe is Russia's gain – in the recent past, Moscow's proposal of a moratorium was ignored. It makes sense for the US too, as Russia possesses systems (e.g., the Zircon missile) that can be deployed on board submarines patrolling the US coastline and create a similar threat to critical US assets.

- Washington's openness to inspections of its BMD sites in Romania and Poland (and reciprocal inspections of

Russian sites) takes care of another Moscow concern – as it addresses US apprehension with regard to some Russian cruise missiles.

- The willingness of the US to discuss the non-stationing in Ukraine of strike weapons or forces in a combat capacity is another potential win for Moscow.

- Talks with the US and allies on confidence-building measures (limiting the scale and scope of military exercises and the like) would be useful, though clearly of secondary importance.

- On Ukraine, by contrast, there has been no real progress. Kyiv cannot implement the terms of Minsk – such

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as constitutional autonomy, amnesty and regional elections before regaining control of the region – against the opposition of Ukrainian nationalists who regard Minsk as high treason; the US support for Minsk is half-hearted while German/French influence in Kyiv is insufficient.

- A massive unprovoked Russian invasion will remain a threat and can be effective as long as it is a threat. Actually invading would not be in Russia's or Putin's own interest.

- Once the peak of the crisis has passed, one should expect tensions to subside somewhat but remain at a fairly high level for the coming weeks and months.

- Resolution of the current crisis can only be achieved as a result of an agreement on Donbass, along the lines of Minsk, and on Ukraine, along the lines of some kind of a non-bloc status that is appropriately fixed in some form. Neither looks likely in the near or even medium-term future.

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Mr. Precedent

This back-and-forth fueled an image of the Kremlin leader as unpredictable. However, viewed in terms of Russia's power interests, some of his moves were predictable. Given Putin's tendency to fill in the void left by (primarily) Western actors, it makes sense to not hesitate and to proceed with consistency and predictability when engaged in conflict with him.

Putin never overestimates himself

In everything Russia does in Syria, Putin knows his limits. He calculates his moves precisely, minimizing his risks.

The intervention in Syria was far away and thus unpopular for most Russians, so Putin was careful to mitigate his own losses. From the outset, he limited the mission to military advisers, the air force, some naval units and a few special forces.

He left the war on the ground to others, first and foremost Iran, which was building up the National Defense Forces in emulation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

For years, this mercenary army had been recapturing opposition areas for Assad. Without Russian air support, however, it would have failed, and in this respect, Putin provided exactly what the regime needed – expertise and modern technology with as little personnel as possible – without risking too much. By testing new weapons systems in Syria, the Russian army was able to both modernize and increase its sales. In this sense, the operation in Syria served as a military and technological litmus test for a possible confrontation with Ukraine.

Putin is pragmatic and flexible

More than any other conflict, the Syrian war was characterized by shifting alliances. Intervening powers did not stick to long-standing associations, but entered into short-term alliances of convenience to advance their own interests. And Putin perfected this skill.

In early 2017, after years of diplomatic cooperation with the United States, Moscow launched new talks in the Kazakh capital of Astana. Putin banked on reaching an understanding with the regional powers of Iran and Turkey, as talks with Washington under Donald Trump were simply pointless and the Europeans no longer had any say in Syria.

The idea was to have the three most influential warring parties defuse the conflict and thereby facilitate negotiations. Ceasefires became "de-escalation zones," but that was a misnomer – Russia and Iran continued to fight alongside Assad, while Turkey opened another front against the Kurds in the north in early 2018.

At this point, Putin found a sparring partner in Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan had turned his back on his former friend Assad at the start of the uprising and had been funding Islamist

militias for years, which meant that Turkey and Russia were on opposing sides in the conflict.

Yet they still worked together. In Idlib, Putin promised to put the brakes on Assad's plans to recapture the city, so that millions of internally displaced people would not be pushed further toward Turkey, while Erdoğan was tasked with containing jihadists. Neither of them succeeded. In the Kurdish-majority, autonomously administered northeast, Russian and Turkish soldiers patrolled together to maintain a buffer zone between Turkey and the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG). However, the region continued to suffer violent clashes.

The highly complex and tense relationship between the two autocrats worked only because each was extremely pragmatic in his thinking. Putin treated the various conflicts with Turkey separately – when the situation in Idlib escalated, it was prevented from affecting Turkish-Russian cooperation east of the Euphrates. Erdoğan also prevented military clashes in one area from affecting relations with Russia elsewhere in Syria.

After 11 years of war in Syria, Putin now finds himself in a comfortable position. He has earned the devotion of the Damascus dictator, whom many countries are likely to acknowledge again sooner or later. Russia's interests in the Middle East seem secure in the medium term. Yet the current situation in Ukraine is different, as President Zelensky wants to lead his people in the direction of the West. For Putin, the biggest difference is the time factor – while it works in his favor in Syria, it is likely to work against him in Ukraine.

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