

## RUSSIA'S TROOP BUILD-UP ACROSS UKRAINE

### Events and Consequences

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#### INTRODUCTION

The entire Western world was hit with shockwaves of anxiety when Putin amassed more than a hundred thousand troops on its side of the border with Ukraine, a region simmering with zones of frozen conflict since 2014 when the Kremlin unilaterally occupied the Crimean Peninsula towards the South of Ukraine. The fifteen-hundred miles long border dividing the two countries has turned into a hotbed of separatism<sup>1</sup> with heavily armed militants procuring complete control of two and impacting six more territories along Ukraine's border with Russia. The prolonged support<sup>2</sup> from Moscow enjoyed by these separatists has only grown stronger and unapologetic post the Crimean annexation. Coming on the backdrop of Moscow's aggressive diplomatic exchange with the new White House administration, this is Russia's largest build-up since 2014 when the objective was laid out and achieved. Eastern Ukraine is one of the world's highest militarized zones where the lives of over a hundred thousand people remain at the mercy of the strongman<sup>3</sup>, Putin. Through remarks that assert a tougher stance on Russia, a seemingly hostile<sup>4</sup> White House seems to have become a cause of concern for Russia and its already dipping economy. The hostility is also prevalent eastwards in the European Union, a region where the Kremlin has for long practiced every possible tactic to reduce the Western influence. Putin has displayed a marvelous will in the past decade to prevent Ukraine's romance with the EU or NATO.

With a rapidly changing world order, a raging pandemic, China's rise, attempts by the US to single out authoritarian regimes across the globe while marshaling the democratic regimes of the "free world", the current crisis needs to be analyzed over this backdrop. To build a better contextual understanding of the issue, the article begins with understanding Kyiv's challenges, its position in the conflict, and the ways it can avoid a full-blown military conflict in the area.

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<sup>1</sup> Melkozerova, Veronika. 2021. "Ukraine's war-torn Donbas region is on the verge of environmental disaster." *NBC*.

<sup>2</sup> Grove, Thomas, and Warren Strobel. 2015. *Where Ukraine Separatists get their Weapons*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-arms-specialreport-idUSKBN0FY0UA20140729>.

<sup>3</sup> AFP. 2021. "Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin to hold first summit in Geneva ." *The Economic Times*, May

<sup>4</sup> Timtchenko, Ilya. 2020. "Which Way Will Ukraine Swing?" *Foreign Policy*.

This is followed by tracing the reasons behind Putin's choice of escalating tensions and the probable diplomatic gains he may have been eyeing. The options for the US, its allies and, other Pacific stakeholders like European Union (France and Germany) will also be analyzed.

## KIEV'S FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA

Since the days of the Russian Empire followed by the Soviet dominance in the region, the Russian identity and nationalism have not been coherent, often inspiring nationalistic as well as separatist tendencies, both abstractly. With its agricultural and economic potential<sup>5</sup>, Ukraine's significance for the Soviets was underlined by the demographic alterations Stalin attempted in the Eastern region of the country. Being the last nation-state to disintegrate from USSR, Ukraine saw successive pro-Russian regimes in the decade of the nineties, providing Russia a safe buffer from the expanding influence of the US and its allies<sup>6</sup>. However, as the EU expanded its reach eastwards, Ukraine too saw demands for EU membership brewing strongly among its public, who considered the West shift as the only solution to their economic woes. The backtrack of Petro Poroshenko on his election promise of entering the EU atop of the ensuing disillusionment with Russia eventually culminated into the mass protests of 2014 that ousted Poroshenko and led to the election of a new President. The comedian-turned President Volodymyr Zelensky, while displaying a strong will to pursue a change in his foreign policy<sup>7</sup> vis-à-vis Russia has found it increasingly difficult to work his way around a politically fragmented European Union, an unreliable US administration, and the confrontational Putin. As seen in Zelensky and Trump's joint address to the press (2017) in the White House, the Ukrainian President repeatedly asserted the need for more substantial support in security and cooperation from the West. Trump, however, continued to raise his aspersions regarding involving the US in the region and categorizing it as a concern of his European counterparts<sup>8</sup> Merkel and Macron, much like his sweeping statements that concern America's other security commitments across the globe.

The cold peace grappling Eastern Ukraine today is a highly destabilizing agent for a country already pitted as a Western client state in the Russian public imagery. Fanning such a conflict allows the Kremlin to not only stoke feelings of nationalism among its domestic public but also entrench Putin's image as a fierce leader unafraid to challenge the almighty Western powers and regain the lost 'Russian' supremacy. For Kyiv, a lack of consensus among its allies in Washington and Europe, who are only prepared to challenge Putin to varying degrees and varying substance, remains a great deal of concern. The expansion of NATO and EU post the demise of the Soviet has not only spooked Russia in many ways but has also triggered a strong

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<sup>5</sup> Leshchenko, Roman. 2020. "Ukraine can feed the world." *Atlantic Council*.

<sup>6</sup> Shtekel, Mykhaylo. 2020. "Why war-torn east Ukraine votes for pro-Russian parties." *Atlantic Council*.

<sup>7</sup> Timtchenko, Ilya. 2020. "Which Way Will Ukraine Swing?" *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>8</sup> Bergmann, Max, and Siena Cicarelli. 2021. *NATO's Financing Gap*. January.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/01/13/494605/natos-financing-gap/>

endorsement<sup>9</sup> of the West among the Ukrainian youth, who will only be disenchanted by any leader who fears an authoritarian with more failure to his name than success. This paradoxical crisis has pitted Ukraine's domestic aspirations against its foreign policy options. Zelensky, who was elected on a promise of adopting a firm stance against Russian bullying is now left with no other option but to sustain a bitterly achieved cold peace along his Eastern borders through enhancing the size and supply of his far-right private militias<sup>10</sup> who are pitted against an army of Kremlin-backed separatists. The dilemma faced in Kyiv is rooted in the hyphenation of NATO and the European Union, one being a military alliance and the other primarily, an economic bloc. Had the previous administrations taken Ukraine into the EU before a NATO enlargement, Ukraine could have found itself in a less troubled political environment.

With the coupling of both these alliances, however, Ukraine finds itself in the middle of a precarious rivalry of big powers that poses serious challenges to its sovereignty, stability, security, and economic well-being. In today's age where upbeat nationalistic rhetoric gains prominence, only a pragmatic approach can prioritize critical action to raise trade and economic potential with the West and deals with Russia primarily as its neighbor, rather than an adversary can roll forward the juggernaut of change. For Zelensky, a politician vulnerable to potshots and underestimation among world leaders also needs to stall his over-dependency on the US and create suitable economic arrangements on all sides of the map to build his domestic credibility and sustain the democratic capital of institutions at home. While this remains a daunting task in a highly militarized anarchic space, this is the only way Kyiv can ensure the sustenance of its independent geopolitical capital in both Moscow and Washington.

## **PUTIN'S HARDBALL: TEST THE WEST**

Since the day Putin consolidated power in Moscow during the last years of the previous century, never has he failed to showcase Russia's geopolitical significance in the face of any conflict whether near or far away from Kremlin. During Trump's tenure at the White House, most authoritarian leaders barring Xi Jinping (post the trade war and Covid-19 outbreak) had found it much easier to traverse the complexities of traditional power coherent diplomacy and punch much above their weight to fill a void that they considered as a result of US retraction from the Middle East and Europe. Erdogan and Putin were the foremost beneficiaries of Trump's tacit approval of self-securing authoritarian regimes, allowing them to engage in conflicts that weren't necessarily theirs.

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<sup>9</sup> Dickinson, Peter. 2020. "How Ukraine's Orange Revolution shaped twenty-first century geopolitics." *Atlantic Council*.

<sup>10</sup> Shuster, Simon, and Billy Perrigo. 2019. "Like, Share, Recruit: How a White-Supremacist Militia Uses Facebook to Radicalize and Train New Members." *TIME Magazine*, <https://time.com/5926750/azov-far-right-movement-facebook/>

Enjoying a cushion in the White House since 2016, Putin got away with repetitive allegations of meddling with US elections, placing a bounty on US soldiers in Afghanistan, and cyber-espionage. The loss of Trump, followed by a Biden administration seemingly determined to levy further sanctions on Russia and cornering Putin seems to not have gone well with Kremlin. Fearing isolation resulting from a declining significance in Washington, long-running economic mayhem, a hostile European Union, the rise of China, and minor crises concerning the opposition leader Navalny, Kremlin chose to retort with equally aggressive diplomacy. What finally culminated into the amassing of troops and heavy weaponry along the borders was preceded by assertive confrontational statements aimed at US allies like India and Japan, the visit of Russia's Foreign Minister to many important strategic centres of Asia, as well as signalling an alignment of its interests with Beijing<sup>11</sup>.

Despite the rising tensions in US-Moscow relations, Putin's dramatic move of lining up troops astonished all his adversaries, demanding the US, and EU to reassess and possibly commit a complete overhaul of their strategies. Despite leading a country tormented by its multiple economic and social woes, Putin retains the enigmatic touch to his strategy-making, often prompting comparison with Churchill's reading of his predecessor Stalin as "a riddle wrapped in a mystique inside an enigma"<sup>12</sup>. His annexation of Crimea also seems to have eventually garnered the kind of tacit approval from then German Chancellor as well as the French government. The districts of Eastern Ukraine like *Kharin*, *Luhansk*, *Dotensk*, and *Odesa* hosting a prominent Russian-speaking population have already witnessed a long-standing deployment of Moscow-backed separatists with easy access to military grade weaponry<sup>13</sup>, Russian passports, and pro-Russian jobs. In such a scenario, any real motive to gain territory should have demanded Kremlin to deploy high-tech drones, missiles, and artillery guns rather than risking thousands of his foot-soldiers, a move that can be considered primarily optical rather than aggressive. This deployment as it seems now did achieve the objective of assuring Kremlin-backed separatists across the border.

An outgoing Trump administration played its role in facilitating the resurgence of such political fissures worldwide. Trump's priorities, aimed at retracting from global commitments also included asking Europe to look after its security concerns and clearing out its troops from Europe; a move that has created a ripple of anxiety among many European countries who are witnessing an already wavering support for 'European' unity. For Putin, the time is ripe to

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<sup>11</sup> Bose, Nandita, and Arshad Mohammad. 2021. "Biden, Putin to meet on June 16 amid disagreements ." *Reuters*, May <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/biden-putin-meet-geneva-june-16-2021-05-25/denies>.

<sup>12</sup> Motyl, Alexander J. 2014. "PUTIN'S ZUGZWANG: The Russia-Ukraine Standoff ." *World Affairs* 345-67.

<sup>13</sup> Grove, Thomas, and Warren Strobel. 2014. *Special Report: Where Ukraine's separatists get their weapons*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-arms-specialreport-idUSKBN0FY0UA20140729>: Reuters

deepen the fissures in an already fragmented EU by leveraging the supplies of the ‘Sputnik V’ vaccine and his massive unidimensional defense state. Campaigns of disinformation regarding Western vaccines and the ill ‘intentions’ of the US are also expected to fulfil this objective in Europe. However, this is not to say that Russia’s perceived insecurity coupled with Putin’s opportunism inherent in flaring up tensions along Eastern Ukrainian is not a result of an ambitious expansion of the US power sphere worrying the Kremlin. For instance, the 1995 NATO expansion faced heavy rebuke from then-President Boris Yeltsin, who highlighted the possibility of a Europe “burning with war” if countries like Georgia would be targeted by NATO to corner Russia<sup>14</sup>. Making clear his view of NATO’s eastward expansion as a sign of hostility towards Russia, Putin, unlike Yeltsin, with a massive military at his disposal, has even gone as far as hinting to George W Bush that “if Ukraine was accepted into NATO, it would cease to exist.”<sup>15</sup>

Russia has thereby clearly maintained its intentions of going to any limit in maintaining Ukraine as its security buffer towards its West. Therefore, the attempts by the US to empower democratic institutions through funding pro-western organizations have further antagonized Russia and heated the region for a fierce battle of influence<sup>16</sup>. As Mearsheimer puts it, the decision of the US to ignore the scepticism in Berlin and Paris regarding the eastward expansion of NATO has led to this undue provocation of long-term geopolitical battle in the region. Signing Ukraine into alliances that were branded largely as engines of Western influence has induced a chain reaction of conflicts in a region already troubled with identity politics, thus creating radical groups on either side. For Russia, a fractured political elite in a weak Ukraine alongside the pre-existing pro-Russian elements along Eastern Ukraine made it much easier to cement an upper hand in regions without even fully engaging in overt warfare<sup>17</sup>. In a region where thousands of radical separatists remain pitted against another, and anxious civilian population also tries to see through each day like a daunting battle. As Mearsheimer said after the Crimean annexation, “No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow’s mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine. Nor would any Russian leader stand idly by while the West helped install a government there that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mearsheimer, John. 2015. "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault." *Foreign Affairs*, January

<sup>15</sup> Dickinson, Peter. 2020. "How Ukraine’s Orange Revolution shaped twenty first century geopolitics." *Atlantic Council*.

<sup>16</sup> Finnegan, Conor, and Mary Alice Parks. 2021. "Amid Russian threat, Blinken backs Ukrainian government in critical visit." *The New York Times*, May <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/amid-russian-threat-blinken-backs-ukrainian-government-critical/story?id=77541045>

<sup>17</sup> Agarwal, Supriya. 2018. "Is the Crimea annexation and the current conflict in Ukraine a result of internal ethnic divide or is it fuelled by Russian elite’s geopolitical motive?" *Diplomatic Council*.

<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer, John. 2015. "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault." *Foreign Affairs*, January

## USA'S STRATEGY AND THE WAY FORWARD

In the events leading up to Moscow's lining up of troops, the attention of US Foreign Policy was shifting increasingly towards China, making Russia a tier-two concern. Adding to this, Biden also let his hostile remarks remind Russia of a US that is willing to assert his government against an authoritarian regime that jeopardizes US allies or another country's security. However, it is this very assertion that Kremlin has challenged in ways that largely resemble a tactical bluff. Attracting global attention, Russia, much like China, is willing to showcase its defiance of US actions to the fence-sitting demagogue-style leaders of the world. Whether or not the US chooses to engage in a seemingly non-resultant conflict in the Far East, the steam it pumps into its diplomacy will decide the extent to which its conflict with Moscow will enrage. To ensure that her geopolitical relevance does not fade into the background, Russia through its actions on the border might just be holding a mirror to the US. A Washington embroiled in a policy battle among the 'inward' and 'outward' lookers will never prefer to allow such geopolitical fault lines to transform into another Taiwan- or Israel-like frontier. Exploiting this dilemma, Moscow is now asking Biden to re-calculate the 'security commitments he is willing to make. As shown by Trump, the political validity of US commitments across the globe is already diminishing steadily among the American public as well as international allies. This way Putin is also allowing Biden to recalibrate his worldview, choosing between cornering Russia into Beijing's arms or utilizing Putin's ambitions in ways to balance against it.

Already faced with fierce competition from China, Putin's actions come as a major reality check from Asia, showing Biden the troubles that come with two major nuclear-powered authoritarian geopolitical adversaries on the map. Biden's playbook for competing against Beijing has seemed to be based completely upon a clear demarcation of global regimes as either authoritarian or democratic. In this context, an authoritarian willing to amass a hundred thousand troops without as much as a public mention of the warning should raise caution in Washington and prompt a reevaluation of their foreign policy. The US cannot solely rely on aspersions regarding Beijing's intentions to automatically create an anti-China bloc in the world. For now, Moscow has every reason to get closer to Beijing, from their worldviews vis-à-vis the West to Moscow's search for an alternative market after US sanctions curtailed any business with the US and its allies. Biden is now left with the choice between ramping up US commitments to face two opposing geopolitical powers and dampening its ferocity against Moscow, which would entail a subtle subservience to Moscow's aggression.

## CONCLUSION

In the last decade, Eastern Europe has witnessed certain kinds of instability that were not predicted by the celebrators of the end of the Cold War. Today, Russia has been nothing less than successful in weighing down Putin's critics in the neighborhood and bolstering support

for any Kremlin-friendly dispensation. On the other hand, US policy for any confrontation had to undergo the domestic political litmus test of relevance. Biden can neither afford to ignore the developments on the Russo-Ukraine border nor can he react stealthily, hoping for tensions to die down. Putin has certainly used the crisis to send out a strong message to not jKyivKiev, but also the new administration in Washington. Biden over time can either try conflict-resolution or mellow down the rhetoric in Russia. But either way, the showcase of such postural aggression is tactically valuable to Kremlin since it forces the US to think twice before shoving aside any of Russia's interests in any region of geopolitical competitiveness across the globe. What is however certain at this point is Putin's resolve to utilize any grievance oriented at the West and utilize it towards its geopolitical advantage. As seen with Russia's growing closeness with Iran, China, Belarus, and Turkey, the Kremlin will not be convinced by assurances from Biden or the EU and rather put its military-industrial complex to gain whatever strategic edge it may gain anywhere in the world. The confrontation with an anxious Kyiv administration may just be a wider strategy that may culminate in micro-battles with the West aimed at degrading the latter's influence in the coming years.