

Russian Obsessions With Ukraine: What Drives Putin Towards War

For years after the Cold War invading one its neighbours had been deemed largely unthinkable. That is, until Moscow's military rolled across the border of Georgia in August 2008 and seized two provinces which it still occupies today. A similar land grab of Ukrainian territory was fraught with horrendous consequences. In 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded both Crimea

and the Eastern Donbas regions. To this day the latter remains a war zone with massive devastation throughout and more than 13,000 persons killed – 25 per cent of those being civilians.

Nevertheless, previous hostilities have not fulfilled Putin's ambitions vis-à-vis Ukraine, what found reflection in recent massive military build-up near Ukraine accompanied by political pressure on Kiev. One of the more alarming aspects of the deployment of Russia's military on the Ukrainian border was the inclusion of field hospital units. More than one military analyst who spoke to Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego pointed out "this is a level of preparation unusual in its scope. The only other possible scenario would be kicking off one of Moscow's large-scale 'Zapad' exercises, none of which are scheduled at present. This has all the appearances of an army preparing for an actual shooting conflict." (The last such Zapad exercise was in 2017 and involved joint operations with military units from both Russia and Belarus).

These facts had this most recent war scare of Russia massing for a full-scale invasion being greeted with anything but scepticism. In an interview with Deutsche Welle, Ukraine UN Ambassador and former Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko described the mood in the capital: "Today, Kyiv authorities have publicised the map of the bomb shelters to the population, just in case." "People started buying imperishable foods. So, that's how high expectations and the fears are in Ukraine"¹ – he added. Kyiv City authorities even created a new database and map showing locations of reinforced underground vaults that can double as bomb shelters in case of a Russian air raid. The map lists some 3,000

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underground locations – to include 47 Metro subway stations, 184 parking garages and 229 subterranean walkways.

On 22 April Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu stepped back from the brink and ordered the more than 100,000 troops that had been deployed on the borders of Ukraine to return to base by 1 May. But mobilising another invasion-level force in only a snap deployment away. Shoigu ordered these units' heavy weapons would remain in western Russia. This hardware will be stored at the Pogonovo firing range in the southwestern Voronezh region, which is 160 kilometres (100 miles) east of the border with Ukraine.²

What also rang a number of alarm bells was the extraordinary footprint of Russian combat aviation in the vicinity of the Ukraine border. Not previously reported but revealed in a series of satellite photos shown to major American media outlets shortly before Shoigu's stand-down order was the presence of the latest model Russian multirole fighter aircraft.

Overpowering Russian Air Power

Notable among these were Sukhoi Su-30SM fighters, seen in a satellite pass over a base in Crimea on 16 April. The aircraft had not been present at the end of March, indicating a large-scale re-deployment from airbases in the Russian Federation Mainland in record time. The same imagery shows the aircraft in different paint schemes, indicating they could have been mobilised from more than one unit.

The Su-30SM is a significant modernised, evolutionary derivative of the famous Su-27 fighter that was first introduced in the 1980s. This state-of-the-art variant is notable for an improved engine, new avionics, and a three-horizontal control surface fly-by-wire flight control system that permits what Russia designers refer to as "supermanoeuvrability" in air-to-air engagements. More significant is the aircraft's NO11M "Bars" passive electronically scanning array (PESA) radar. Designed by the same NIIP design bureau that developed the Mikoyan MiG-31's NO07 Zaslon-B PESA radar, the Bars radar – according to Russian designers who discussed the radar's capabilities at both Indian and Kazakhstan defence expos (both nations are customers for the Su-30SM aircraft – and in interviews they have given to multiple aerospace press outlets – is likewise capable of acting like a "mini-AWACS".

The battle management functionality of this aircraft could come in handy, given the armada of air power now positioned to support a Russian invasion. In addition to the older-model Su-27s, the other models now within striking distance of major targets in Ukraine are the Su-24 and Su-34. These are medium range tactical two-seat bomber aircraft in the mode of the (now-retired) US General Dynamics F-111.

For the close-air support (CAS) mission Russia has deployed entire squadrons of the air-to-ground Su-25 aircraft. This aeroplane has long been referred to as “the flying tank” by the Russian military. It is designed with titanium shielding around the cockpit to protect the pilot from ground fire when making low altitude bombing and strafing runs.

Blitzkrieg and Blockade

Should hostilities break out, Moscow’s objective will be for the Russian-speaking cities in Ukraine “to be occupied in the course of a victorious and fleeting blitzkrieg,” said Russian military commentator Pavel Felgenhauer. Shoigu’s military was “preparing a deep operation for the total defeat of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.”³

“They have appropriately deployed the various elements of airpower that would be needed to establish air superiority over the battlefield and directly support the ground troops,” said Philip Breedlove, the retired U.S. Air Force general who was the NATO military commander at SHAPE when Russian “Little Green Men” occupied Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014.⁴ Gen. Breedlove added that the satellite photos indicated that Russia’s military were not positioned to launch an attack at a moment’s notice, but rather placed in such a manner that Moscow would have a range of options to take military action.

Air power and armoured columns are not the end of the means put to use by Moscow to try and dismember its former vassal state. According to the Jamestown Foundation’s Eurasia Daily Monitor, the Russian Navy will soon have an armada of 50 warships in the Black Sea.⁵ This is thanks to additional ships seconded from the Caspian and Baltic fleets – some of which are equipped for amphibious operations. Turning the Black Sea into a Russian lake is not just for show, either. According to recent testimony by Ukraine Defence Minister Andrii Taran before the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Security and Defence Russia’s naval deployments in the Black and Azov Seas is designed to “block important trade routes in international waters.”⁶ A blockade of Ukraine’s seaports would have devastating effect on the nation’s economy. The major portion of the country’s Ukraine’s USD 103 billion in foreign trade last year was moved by commercial sea freight.

The week of 26 April began with the announcement that Russia’s navy would be closing off three additional sections of the Black Sea near Crimea for what Ria Novosti in Moscow calls six months of “training exercises.” Ten days ago, Russia’s MoD closed the southern approaches to the Kerch Strait to all foreign navies and foreign governments through the end of October.⁷ There is an analogous prohibition for waters off the coast of Russia’s Opuk training ground, a 100 km-long zone between Hurzuf and Sevastopol, and Crimea’s westernmost territory – all of which face the southern Kherson region. Russia’s Defence Ministry has stated these closures will not “interfere with shipping

through the Kerch Strait” or the Sea of Azov ports. But these assurances ring hollow given past Russian behaviour. In November 2018 Russia seized three Ukrainian Navy ships – the beginning of a string of similar incidents. Russian coast guard vessels now regularly harass commercial ships steaming for the same Ukrainian ports that Moscow assures will not be blocked from commercial sea traffic. These ships are often detained for days at a time regardless of whether the cargo is time-sensitive or perishable.

Putin’s Dilemma

Putin faces some unhappy options. There is significant doubt that his country could afford the proverbial “short victorious war” that he has used in the past and that Russian leaders historically believe is a panacea for internal domestic unrest. Putin’s inner circle faces numerous problems due to sagging economic numbers, low oil prices, the impact of COVID on the nation and an opposition movement led by the jailed Aleksei Navalny. Moreover, none other than the Polish-American statesman Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor in the Carter Administration, once observed: “It cannot be stressed enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”⁸

But, while invading Ukraine might “restore the empire” it would also most likely kick off crushing sanctions against Russia. Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba has called for expelling Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) network, which facilitates wire transfer payments to more than 11,000 banks operating in more than 200 countries and territories worldwide. These realities, plus the planning for a June summit between the former KGB Lt. Col. in the Kremlin and US President Joe Biden, may cause those in Moscow to re-assess the wisdom of making war on their largest neighbour. As the editor of a local business news service here in Kiev wrote this week, “the lure of a one-on-one summit is expected to keep Putin on his best behaviour – for at least the next six weeks.”

David v. Goliath

What makes the current dynamic fraught with danger is that the Ukrainian military is not seen as adequately prepared for the challenge of a full-force Russian incursion. To begin with, the Ukrainian military is outnumbered. According to the Global Firepower Index Ukraine has 255,000 active military personnel and another 900,000 reservists, while Russia has 1 million active military personnel and another 2 million reservists.⁹ On the same Ukraine’s military overall rating of total personnel plus average age and performance of its hardware ranks below that of nations with smaller populations, like Israel and Australia, and also below lesser-developed nations like Indonesia and Vietnam.

Ukraine's armed forces also suffer from a lack of modern equipment. Delivery of advanced military hardware from the US authorised by the US Congress was repeatedly blocked during the Obama Administration and was only released and delivered under the four years of the Trump presidency.¹⁰ This gave the Ukrainian military access to some badly-needed systems like the Javelin ATGM. Up to this point the military had almost no anti-tank systems equipped with the tandem warhead needed to defeat a Russian tank or other vehicle fitted with reactive armour or an active protection system.

Ukraine's air forces suffer perhaps the most from the post-Soviet dearth of state investment in the armed forces, having not acquired a single new combat aircraft since 1991.¹¹ The air force, in the words of one local Ukrainian aerospace enterprise director, is a "flying museum." There is not a single aeroplane less than 30 years old and many others in inventory date from between 40 to 50 years in service. Thus, there have been suggestions that providing Kiev with modern fighter aircraft – beginning with US Excess Defense Articles (EDA) like used Boeing F-15C/D models – could be a first step in a long-term solution. In the immediate future, however, Ukraine needs better air defence systems to combat Russia's air force and robust electronic warfare systems to blind Russian radar and other sensors. Ukraine's is indeed far more prepared for war than it was when it was invaded on orders from Putin in 2014, but disparities of almost David and Goliath proportions remain.¹² Ukraine annual defence spending is currently about US \$5.2 billion, while Russia's is more than 12 times this sum at \$65 billion.

Adequate Response Required

More than one commentator has observed that Ukraine is in the same situation as the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan – both being nations that have much larger neighbours who present the constant threat of invasion based on "this is our Sudetenland"- like rationales. Both Ukraine and the ROC are also regarded by the US as important partners, but Washington cannot bring itself to properly frame the true nature of both Russia and China and continues to contextualise these nations' behaviour. When all else fails, the US foreign policy establishment takes refuge in the naïve cliché of "if we were to treat Russia and China like enemies then they would become as such."

The situation with the EU is not much better. Eastern EU nations like Poland have a realistic assessment of the dangers posed by Moscow, but Berlin and Paris still fail to categorise the illegal invasions of Crimea and the Donbas as legitimate cause for severing ties with Russia.

In an analysis for the European Geopolitica Intelligence Services news site, longtime European journalist Karl Peter-Schwarz writes: "Ms. Merkel, Mr. Macron and Mr. Johnson's behaviour toward President Biden is somewhat reminiscent of Noah's sons, who cover their father's nakedness. The decline of the US and the rise of China dominate international security today, overshadowing all other conflicts. And, like with Russia, the EU cannot agree on a common line toward Beijing. Torn

between economic interests and fears of Chinese hegemony, the EU stares as if spellbound at the worsening conflict between Beijing and Washington. The world is losing Europe, but it does not look as if the world will notice.”

Meanwhile, Ukraine’s fate hangs in the balance. While Russia continues to plan for war, the leadership in Kiev tries to remind both Washington and Brussels of what happened the last time a belligerent nation progressively preyed on its neighbours and demanded one territorial concession after another.

Conclusions

1. On 22 April Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered the more than 100,000 troops that had been deployed on the borders of Ukraine to return to base by 1 May. But mobilising another invasion-level force in only a snap deployment away. Shoigu ordered these units’ heavy weapons would remain in western Russia.

2. Russian President Vladimir Putin faces some unhappy options. There is significant doubt that his country could afford the proverbial “short victorious war” that that Russian leaders historically believe is a panacea for internal domestic unrest. While invading Ukraine might “restore the empire” it would also most likely kick off crushing sanctions against Russia. These realities, plus the planning for a June summit between and US President Joe Biden, may cause those in Moscow to re-assess the wisdom of making war on their largest neighbour.

3. What makes the current dynamic fraught with danger is that the Ukrainian military is not seen as adequately prepared for the challenge of a full-force Russian incursion. There have been suggestions that providing Kiev with modern fighter aircraft – beginning with US Excess Defense Articles (EDA) like used Boeing F-15C/D models – could be a first step in a long-term solution. In the immediate future, however, Ukraine needs better air defence systems to combat Russia’s air force and robust electronic warfare systems to blind Russian radar and other sensors. Ukraine’s is far more prepared for war than it was when it was invaded on orders from Putin in 2014, but disparities of almost David and Goliath proportions remain

Author: Reuben F. Johnson, Research Fellow at Security and Defence Programme of Casimir Pulaski Foundation

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³ “Ukraine faces ‘wipe out blitzkrieg’ as sabre-rattling Russian expert claims Putin mobilising HALF A MILLION troop,” *The Sun*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/14644955/ukraine-faces-blitzkrieg-expert-putin-mobilising-half-million-troops/>

⁴ „Satellite Images Show Russia’s Expanding Ukraine Buildup,” WSJ, April 20, 2021,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/satellite-images-show-russias-expanding-ukraine-buildup-11618917238>

⁵ „Moscow Moving 15 Warships From Caspian Sea to Waters off Ukraine,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 18 Issue: 59, [https://news.us20.list-](https://news.us20.list-manage.com/track/click?u=f752eb690049fc68524960a91&id=bb0fdf136c&e=ed57b9ef39)

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⁶ „SEDE Subcommittee - EU-Ukraine security and defence cooperation with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Andrii TARAN,” European Parliament, https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/sede-subcommittee-eu-ukraine-security-and-defence-cooperation-with-ukrainian-minister-of-defence-and_20210414_EP-113551A_EVD_0093_p

⁷ „Россия закрыла некоторые районы Черного моря для иностранных кораблей,” [https://news.us20.list-](https://news.us20.list-manage.com/track/click?u=f752eb690049fc68524960a91&id=125e4e3832&e=ed57b9ef39)

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⁸ Zbigniew Brzeziński, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global*

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⁹ Global Fire Power, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>

¹⁰ „Defying Obama, Many in Congress Press to Arm Ukraine,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/12/world/europe/defying-obama-many-in-congress-press-to-arm-ukraine.html>

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