Is Russia about to start a new war in Ukraine?

For the second time in 2021, a massive Russian military build-up and increasingly hostile rhetoric point to a planned attack on Ukraine. Whereas the previous build-up ended in April with the withdrawal of most troops, this time the signs are more worrying. Russia is demanding a halt to NATO activity in and around Ukraine. The US and the EU are threatening harsh new sanctions against Russia if the attack goes ahead.

Threatening Russian manoeuvres close to the Ukrainian border

In October 2021, reports began emerging that large contingents of Russian troops were being moved close to the Ukrainian border, supported by lethal weapons such as tanks and Buk missiles of the type used to shoot down flight MH17 in July 2014. The number of troops involved is thought to be already over 90,000 and, according to US intelligence, it could reach 175,000 by January 2021. Although not all the logistical support is yet in place, Ukrainian defence officials suggest that there is a very real possibility of a large-scale Russian attack beginning in January or February 2021. They also claim that Russia has already blocked access to two-thirds of the Azov Sea around the illegally annexed Crimean Peninsula.

Troop movements on a similar scale were seen close to the Ukrainian border in spring 2021. On that occasion, most of the personnel involved were subsequently moved away from Ukraine in April, while much of their equipment was left behind, facilitating future rapid deployment to the region.

The current movements are mostly taking place at night-time, unlike the previous more overt manoeuvres – according to analysts, a possible sign that Russia's intentions are more serious this time. In contrast to the spring, Russia is not even pretending to be carrying out military exercises. Another worrying sign is the Kremlin's increasingly bellicose rhetoric. Already in July 2021, an essay by Vladimir Putin on the 'historical unity' of Moscow and Kyiv cast doubt on Ukrainian statehood and argued that some Ukrainian territory legitimately belonged to Russia – practically a declaration of war, according to one commentator. On 9 December, Putin warned of 'genocide' in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, where Ukrainian government troops are fighting pro-Russia separatists. This was perhaps an attempt to create a pretext for an attack, given that Russia's 2014 military doctrine lists protection of Russian citizens abroad as one of the cases justifying the use of military force.

Kremlin officials deny that Russia is planning an attack. They put the blame for the latest standoff on NATO – describing the presence of US warships in the Black Sea as a 'provocation' – and Ukraine, which has allegedly deployed 125,000 troops to Donbas. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accuses NATO of risking 'the nightmare scenario of a military confrontation', while his deputy, Sergei Ryabkov, compares the situation to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

What is Russia trying to achieve?

In spring 2021, many observers dismissed Russia's threatening moves as mere 'sabre-rattling', possibly as an attempt to force concessions in the stalemated Donbas conflict. This time again, there are links to the Donbas situation – the first signs of a military build-up coincided with Ukraine's first use in October of lethal Turkish-made drones against separatists.

However, Russia's main concern appears to be NATO's presence in and around Ukraine. It has consistently identified the presence of NATO military infrastructure close to its borders as a serious threat, for example, in its 2021 national security strategy. Putin is demanding security guarantees from the Alliance: no eastwards expansion, no offensive strike weapons – such as missiles – in states bordering Russia, and no military exercises close to Russia.

In fact, NATO presence in Ukraine remains limited. Cooperation has increased since 2014 but has mainly focused on helping Kyiv to restructure its armed forces and improve resilience. There are trainers, but no permanent troops. US military aid to Ukraine (US$450 million so far in 2021) includes some lethal weapons,
such as anti-tank missiles. On the other hand, enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia, while it has never been explicitly excluded, remains a distant prospect.

US President Joe Biden has ruled out a unilateral US military intervention, and Ukraine could hardly defeat Russia on its own. However, Ukrainian armed forces are now significantly more capable than they were in 2014 and could inflict serious losses on Russian invaders. Russia might hope to secure strategically important assets, such as the Azov sea port of Mariupol or freshwater supplies, to relieve Crimea's chronic water shortage. However, such acquisitions could hardly outweigh the huge economic costs imposed by Western sanctions (see below). While annexing Crimea gave Putin's popularity a huge boost, escalating tensions with the West have not boosted his flagging approval ratings so far. There appears to be little appetite among ordinary Russians for renewed conflict with Ukraine, most likely involving heavy casualties; nearly half of respondents to surveys by independent pollsters Levada Centre view Ukraine favourably, over half would like to see friendly relations between Russia and Ukraine as independent states, and less than one-fifth subscribe to the view that the two countries should be united. Nor would a Russian invasion be welcomed in Ukraine, where attachment to the 'Russian World' has faded, even among ethnic Russians.

Western responses

The US has offered 'ironclad' support for Ukrainian sovereignty, and Biden has firmly rejected Kremlin red lines on NATO expansion. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg insists on Ukraine's right to choose its own path. While a military response is not currently on the table, Washington and Brussels are considering economic sanctions that, according to US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, go far beyond those adopted in 2014. A 12 December statement by the G7 countries condemns 'Russia's military build-up and aggressive rhetoric' and warns that aggression will carry severe costs.

The US and the EU have not revealed what sanctions they might impose. However, Sullivan has mentioned excluding Russia from the international SWIFT bank messaging system – described in 2015 as a last-resort 'nuclear option' – as one of the probable measures. Although Russian banks have made efforts to prepare by developing alternative systems, some experts still claim that exclusion from SWIFT would have a devastating economic impact, by making it harder for Russia to receive payments for its exports. Germany has warned that Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline – currently awaiting regulatory approval – will not be allowed to come into service in the event of a new escalation in Ukraine.

Biden has telephoned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and the leaders of nine NATO countries that are neighbours or near-neighbours of Ukraine, to assure them that they will be involved in any decisions. French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have met virtually with Putin; on both occasions, Putin reiterated his earlier demands to Biden for security guarantees from NATO.

Outlook

Several weeks after the 2021 spring military build-up, Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin's first summit in June 2021 appeared to put US-Russia relations on a better track by launching dialogue on security issues. There was no meeting of minds at the 7 December 2021 video-call between the two leaders; however, some observers see it as a positive sign that they have at least agreed to keep talking. Putin accuses the West of dismissing Russia's security concerns; in the best-case scenario, he might be prepared to de-escalate in exchange for some kind of assurances. On the other hand, further talks may simply give him more time to prepare an attack. According to some, the worst-case scenario could even see fighting spreading to other European countries.

European Parliament (EP) position: in its April 2021 resolution on Russia, adopted soon after the end of the previous military build-up, the EP condemned Russia's 'threatening and destabilising actions' and praised Ukraine for its 'proportionate response'. The EP called on Russia to fully withdraw its troops and end its provocations. In the event of a future invasion of Ukraine, the EP suggested that the EU could stop importing Russian oil and gas, exclude Russia from the SWIFT payment system, and impose asset freezes and visa bans on oligarchs close to the Russian authorities and their families.

On 14 December 2021, the EP debated the situation at the Ukrainian border and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine in the presence of EU High Representative Josep Borrell. A resolution on the subject is due to be voted on 16 December.