Russia's Policies toward Ukraine: The Context, Evolution, and Outlook

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Abstract

The ongoing war in Ukraine was anything but an accident. Its outbreak was not predicted by many and it was thought that it could be prevented. It was the culmination of two opposite long-term trends which finally collided head-on in February 2014, and then again in February 2022. One was Russia's drive to re-establish itself as a great power after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The other was the determination of the United States to contain Russia's comeback to the world scene as a major independent force, which threatened the integrity of the US-established and dominated order not just in Europe, but elsewhere.

Keywords: Ukraine, Conflict, Consequences, Collision, US-dominated Order, Russia's Comeback.

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The Historical Context

The existing battleground began to emerge just a few years after the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. The proximate cause of the US-Russian collision was the process of NATO's eastern expansion which began in the early-mid 1990s. First, the former Soviet Union's Eastern European satellites were invited to join the US-led alliance, and then, the ex-Soviet Baltic republics in April 2008. Though, at Washington's instigation, Ukraine and Georgia were promised NATO membership. Through the efforts of more cautious France and Germany, no membership action plan was issued and the time period needed for accession was not specified. An indirect consequence of that decision was the five-day war between Georgia and Russia, which Tbilisi started in August 2008, hoping to restore its control over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, thus eliminating an obstacle to NATO accession. It should be mentioned that Russia's own probing on the possible joining of NATO, by President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, and then by Vladimir Putin in the 2000s, were brushed off by their U.S. counterparts.

The Georgia war demonstrated that any further expansion by the Western military alliance into former Soviet territory, which Moscow considered vital for Russia's national security, would not be peaceful. Georgia, however, was more of a peripheral concern, while Ukraine was absolutely central. Ukraine, the second-biggest ex-Soviet republic in terms of population and economic significance, was situated next to central Russian regions. Its borders came within a few hundred kilometers of Moscow itself. It owned Crimea, the Russian Empire's and then the Soviet Union's key stronghold in the Black Sea, which hosted the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The Ukrainian defense industry, part of the Soviet Union's military-industrial complex, continued to supply arms to the Russian Armed Forces. Just as important, Ukraine, whose capital Kyiv carried the sobriquet of the "mother of Russian cities,"[1] was seen by the Russians as part of the country's historical core. Roughly a quarter of the

[1] Putin. V., "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 (accessed on November 5, 2022).

Ukrainian population was of the ethnic Russian stock, and over half spoke Russian as their first language. Last but not least, Orthodox Christians in Ukraine belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church under the Patriarch of Moscow.

Yet, since the break-up of the USSR, Moscow's approach to Ukraine was woefully non-strategic. The Kremlin, initially weak and distracted by myriad of problems in the wake of the Soviet demise, only dealt with some pressing issues, such as the transfer to Russia of Soviet nuclear missiles deployed in Ukraine (accomplished with the help of the United States which feared proliferation); sealing Ukraine's non-nuclear status coupled with assurances (contained in the so-called Budapest memorandum) on the country's territorial integrity; the division of the Black Sea Fleet and the conditions for the basing of its (much larger) Russian portion in Sevastopol; negotiating the terms of Russian gas transit to Central and Western Europe via Ukrainian territory and the price of gas to Ukraine itself (subsidized by Russia to the tune of $85 billion over two decades, according to the Kremlin); and finally, delimitation of the Russo-Ukrainian border enshrined in a treaty signed in 1997.

What Russia failed to do was to work with the Ukrainian elites and the broader public to establish a new basis for relations between the two closely related and intertwined parts of historical Russia, with Ukraine now an independent state rather than a province of a large common entity. Russian moneyed elites were busy cutting deals (mostly non-transparent and often criminal) with their Ukrainian counterparts. The Kremlin sought to cultivate Ukrainian politicians and oligarchs and both believed that all problems were solvable with money and that the population at large. Ukrainian society did not matter. To most Russian officials, Ukraine, for all the trappings of *de facto* independence, still remained a province of Russia which did not require special expertise, or deeper knowledge. There were dozens of times more experts were in Moscow on faraway regions such as Latin America and Africa, than on Ukraine.

This was Russia's cardinal mistake. Ukrainian nationalism, which was essentially anti-Russian, was not born in 1991, but dated back to the mid-19th century.[2] Suppressed and marginalized in both imperial and then Soviet times, it quickly rose to prominence and then dominance as soon as the empire or the USSR disintegrated. Lack of competition from a new Russo-Ukrainian integrationist or even partnership project, it was able to impose its narrow-minded version of "Ukrainianess" on the elites and society as a whole. As one should have expected, Ukrainian nationalism received a powerful moral boost and material support from the Ukrainian diaspora in the West, mostly the United States and Canada. American and other western politicians, democracy-promoting NGOs, and various U.S. and European government agencies saw the opportunity to make sure that Ukraine is finally and securely separated from Russia, dealing a severe blow to Moscow's great power ambitions and erecting a major bulwark against "Russian imperialism" and simultaneously a vantage position to influence developments within Russia.

The 2004 so-called Orange Revolution in Kyiv was the first attempt to turn post-Soviet Ukraine toward the West and away from Russia. It fell through by 2010, due to the squabbles among its leaders, allowing Moscow one final chance to build a productive relationship with Kyiv. Alas! the opportunity was missed through the old sins of reliance on a handful of elite figures, the belief that money is the solution, and the inability and incompetence of working with the wider public to promote an attractive model of relations with Russia. The Kremlin also had the misfortune of having to deal with a hugely corrupt, totally self-serving, and increasingly unpopular leader of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, who was given to double-speaking and double-dealing between Moscow and the West.

[2] Putin. V., "Putin notes founders of Ukrainian nationalism favored good relations with Russia", *TASS News Agency*, February 21, 2020, https://tass.com/politics/1122749 (accessed on November 5, 2022).

The Ukraine Crisis: Act One

The trigger to launch the conflict was the maiden protests-turned-riots in Kyiv -- officially known in Ukraine now as the Revolution of Dignity -- which began in late 2013. This led in late February 2014, to the toppling of the constitutionally elected President Yanukovych – despite the assurances given to him by the three EU foreign ministers (France, Germany, and Poland) who had brokered a deal between the Ukrainian government and the opposition. To the Kremlin, this was a *coup d'état* by a coalition of ultra-nationalist forces, and pro-western elements in civil society encouraged and legitimized by western governments and NGOs and financed by disgruntled Ukrainian oligarchs.[3]

The collision between Russia and the West over Ukraine might have been averted, but only at the price of Moscow giving up its ambitions of becoming again a major independent global player. However, it is unthinkable, given the self-image of the Russian elite and society, or of Washington accepting Russian security needs in Europe. This would have meant America's recognition of external limits to its pre-dominant global power. It also would have meant "appeasement" of Russia's political regime and its leader, President Vladimir Putin. Both much-demonized by the western media.

Putin, watching the developments which had led to the formation in Kiev of an authority composed of anti-Russian nationalists and pro-Western figures, lost no time in reacting. He dispatched Russian military forces to Crimea, where Moscow had long kept a naval base, to take over the overwhelmingly Russian-populated peninsula that had been administratively transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet republic only in 1954. Seeing that the Kyiv putschists – as Putin called them – were determined to seek Ukraine's membership in NATO, the Russian president was resolved to deny them the strategically important position in the Black Sea

[3] Putin. V, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", February 21, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/67828 (accessed on November 5, 2022).

region. Putin once said, "we would rather welcome NATO sailors to Sevastopol (the headquarters of the Black Sea Fleet) on a friendly visit than to be hosted by them there."[4]

This takeover was accomplished, miraculously, without firing a shot. The Ukrainian garrison surrendered, and the locals greeted Russian soldiers as liberators. In March 2014, Crimea held a referendum and was admitted to the Russian Federation[5]. The Kyiv regime's first steps gave a sense of the country's new direction. The special status of the Russian language was to be abolished, as was Ukraine's neutral status – in favour of NATO membership. This led to a backlash in Ukraine's eastern and southern regions (roughly from Kharkov to Odessa), Russian-speaking and Russia-leaning regions, which Russians collectively used to refer to as *Novorossiya* – New Russia.

The two regions that make up the Donbas industrial area, Donetsk and Lugansk, held referendums in May 2014, to establish themselves as independent "people's republics." Similar trends were observable in other regions, including Kharkov and Odessa. In the heady environment that was immediately dubbed the "Russian spring," Russia gave moral and material support to the groups that rejected Kyiv's westward and anti-Russian tilt. Kyiv, for its part, used military force against "separatists." An armed conflict in Donbas began. Ukrainian forces, which did not fire a shot during Russia's seizure of Crimea, managed to take control of much of the Donbas area and threatened the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk. At that time, Russian troops intervened covertly to push back.

Although Putin – ever careful to stand on legal ground -- still had a mandate from the upper chamber of the Russian parliament to use military forces in Ukraine, not just Crimea. He chose not to do so. The Kremlin even recognized Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections held

[4] Putin. V., "Address by President of the Russian Federation", March 18, 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603 (accessed on November 5, 2022).
[5] The Kremlin, "Agreement on the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation signed", March 18, 2014, (accessed on November 5 2022).

in May and October 2014, probably hoping to manage the new leadership under President Petro Poroshenko who promised peace and reconciliation. Russia did provide all-round support, including military assistance, to the two Donbas regions. Thanks to that Russian support, the people's republics – which Moscow at that time did not yet formally recognize - managed to rebuff the attack and retain a portion of the territory of the respected regions, including the capital cities.

As a result of two successive agreements reached at Minsk, Belarus, first in August 2014, and then in February 2015, the fighting stopped, and a framework for conflict resolution was laid out. Under the second Minsk agreement, reached with the participation of Germany and France, Donbas was to be given wide constitutional autonomy within Ukraine. From Moscow's perspective, that autonomy would give pro-Russia voices a prominent place in Ukraine's domestic politics and prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. It could also serve as a model for a wholesale reorganization of the Ukrainian state along the lines of a federation, Russia's long-time preference.

The ceasefire, however, did not hold much over the following seven years. For the Ukrainian ultranationalists, very influential in Kyiv, the Minsk agreements were a win for Russia and thus high treason. No wonder that from the very beginning no Ukrainian government was willing to implement them. Germany and France, which were co-signatories of the second Minsk Accord, had insufficient leverage in Kyiv and ended up *de facto* by fully siding with the Ukrainian position. Russia's insistence that the conflict in Ukraine was in fact a civil war between Kyiv, on the one hand, and the Donbas republics (whose leaders were also in Minsk and signed agreements), on the other, was essentially rejected by both Ukraine and its western supporters.[6] Instead, they agreed with the Ukrainian interpretation of the conflict being an aggression launched by Russia.

[6] "Kiev authorities do not observe their obligations under Minsk agreements – Putin", TASS News Agency, December 18, 2014, https://tass.com/russia/767724/amp (accessed on November 5, 2022).

From 2015-2022, the line of contact in Donbas was never quiet for a long time. In the eight years of the armed conflict, about 15,000 people lost their lives, mostly in the part of Donbas that was backed by Russia. The two self-proclaimed republics spent those years in a legal limbo, unrecognized by anyone, and are effectively no longer part of Ukraine but not yet exactly part of Russia. As western-supported Ukraine was strengthening its military muscles, the shelling of Donetsk, a city very close to the frontline, intensified. Russia appeared essentially helpless to shield those whom it vowed to protect. Moscow found itself in an increasingly difficult situation.

Still, right until mid-February 2022, there was a possibility to resolve the issue diplomatically. This required, besides the implementation of Donbas' autonomy along the lines of the Minsk II accord; a U.S. willingness to withdraw the option for Ukraine to join NATO; and Washington's commitment to Ukraine's *de facto* as well as *de jure* neutral status. To agree to that would have definitely constituted a reputational blow to the American leadership, which had declared already in 2008 – without an intention to act on that promise - that NATO's door would be open to Ukraine. The stakes for Russia, however, were much higher. Any Kremlin leadership which would have meekly tolerated the emergence of a virulently anti-Russian US client state so close to Moscow, it would have lost the confidence of Russia's military and security community.

En Route to Act Two, 2021-2022

It appeared to most people that Donbas was going to become another protracted conflict, like several others in the post-Soviet space, e.g., Transnistria or Abkhazia. It turned out differently, however. The election of Vladimir Zelensky as Ukraine's president in 2019, was cautiously welcomed in Moscow. The newcomer to Kyiv's political elite, a Russian-speaking Jew from Ukraine's south, had won the election on a promise of a peaceful settlement with Russia. Contacts were promptly established between the Kremlin and Kyiv, initially leading to productive high-level dialogue. Yet, already in 2020, the dialogue stalled. Zelensky, under

attack from his political rivals, decided to seek support from the powerful nationalist quarters in Ukraine which led to an about-face in his contacts with Moscow. The commitments he made at the quadrilateral summit (France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine) in Paris in December 2019, were never fulfilled. Domestically, Zelensky moved against those elements within Ukraine that supported reconciliation with Russia, banning their media and repressing their leaders.[7]

The election of President Joe Biden in early 2021 resulted in an upsurge of U.S.-NATO support for the Ukrainian military. It was in terms of weapons assistance and training, and intensification of NATO's military exercises in the area. It featured U.S. strategic bombers flying close to Russia's borders and a UK destroyer testing Russia's defenses just off the coast of Crimea. Russia, for its part, staged major military exercises along the entire border with Ukraine. The meeting between Presidents Putin and Biden in Geneva in June 2021, went generally well, but it failed to address the Donbas issue and thus stopped the military escalation around Ukraine.

By the fall of 2021, Vladimir Putin may have decided that the dynamic of the Ukraine issue was working against Russia. The Ukrainian leadership was not only visibly hardening its rhetoric but also working hard to upgrade its military. The Ukrainian military doctrine provided for the use of force to regain not only Donbas but also Crimea. Putin, who in his two decades at the top of the Russian power structure had presided over the deterioration of Russian national security as a result of Ukraine's *de facto* military alignment with the United States and NATO, probably saw that a fight over Ukraine was becoming inevitable. In November 2021, he exhorted Russian diplomats to use military tension as a tool in relations with the West, and in December he laid out his demands that would

[7] Mirovalov M., "In risky move, Ukraine's president bans pro-Russian media", *Al Jazeera*, February 5, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2021/2/5/ukraines-president-bans-pro-russian-networks-risking-support (accessed on November 6, 2022).

guarantee Russia's security. No Ukraine in NATO, and no NATO in Ukraine were central to the entire package.[8]

Putin's demands led to intense diplomatic talks in January and February 2022, which opened opportunities for agreements on arms control and confidence building between the U.S.-NATO and Russia, but no progress on Ukraine's exclusion from NATO's future enlargement and on the implementation of the Minsk accords. Russia's demonstration of military force on Ukraine's borders, which Moscow hoped would move the West to take Putin's demands more seriously, failed to achieve its goals. The Russian president was visibly exasperated with his personal contacts with his German and French counterparts. Zelensky's public hint at revising Ukraine's nuclear status, which went unchallenged by western leaders at the Munich Security Conference, might have been the last straw.

Putin is known to follow the maxim, if a fight is inevitable, it makes sense to strike first. He moved to do what he had long refrained from – formally recognizing the two Donbas republics as independent states, concluding mutual assistance treaties with them, and, on February 24, 2022, launching a military campaign to protect the new allies and restore to them the parts of the two regions still controlled by Kyiv. The conduct of the operation itself is not the subject of this article. The war is continuing, and a final judgment on it is premature as of this writing.

About nine months since the launch of Russia's "special military operation," the battle for Ukraine has become the most serious major power conflict – albeit so far in a proxy format -- since the end of the Cold War, and potentially the most dangerous one, threatening a direct U.S.-Russian collision. Early attempts to resolve it through a peace settlement ended in failure when Kyiv, advised by Washington and London, backed down from an outline agreement reached in April 2022, in Istanbul. It

[8] Roth, A., "Russia will act if Nato countries cross Ukraine 'red lines', Putin says", *The Guardian*, November 30, 2021, https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/30/russia-will-act-if-nato-countries-cross-ukraine-red-lines-putin-says (accessed on November 6, 2022).

needs to be added that the draft agreement was also unpopular in Russia. By early October 2022, Russia formally incorporated the territory its forces then controlled – in Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhe and Kherson regions – into the Russian Federation. Ukraine, the West, and most UN member states condemned the move. The fighting continued.

Outlook

For Russia, the fighting in Ukraine – which is the military element of the wider hybrid war between Russia and the collective West -- is existential. The Kremlin cannot afford to lose it or be seen losing by the Russian people. A failure to achieve meaningful results, which would be worth the substantial sacrifice in lives, treasure, and economic opportunities, would have dire consequences for Russia's domestic condition, including the country's political stability.

For Russia, a minimum acceptable outcome in Ukraine would require consolidation of full control over the territories of the two Donbas republics which are now formally part of the Russian Federation and of the two other oblasts, Zaporozhe and Kherson. They are now partially controlled by the Russian forces. Depending on the future developments on the battlefield, Russia might add other Ukrainian territories to the Federation.

It is likely that when the fighting in Ukraine stops, the country's pre-February 24, 2022, territory would be divided into the part that will be Russia's new regions, and the territory that would remain under the control of the Ukrainian state. With regard to the latter, Russia's initial demands were "demilitarization" (military neutrality and only a small national army) and "denazification" (ridding Ukraine's elites of all ultra-nationalist, anti-Russian elements).[9] The first of these goals requires an understanding not only with Ukraine, but above all with the United States;

[9] "Decision taken on denazification, demilitarization of Ukraine – Putin", TASS News Agency, February 24, 2022, https://tass.com/politics/1409189 (accessed on November 6, 2022).

the second one is only achievable if Russia effectively controls all of Ukraine's territory – a very long shot.

The war's outcome will ultimately be decided on the battlefield, of course. Russia may not be able to reach its maximum objectives, but there is no chance of it surrendering to the United States – which it sees as a near-belligerent and its main enemy in the Ukraine war.

For the United States and its allies, not to speak of Kyiv, all Russian objectives, including the minimum ones, are anathema. Washington aims to defeat Russia in Ukraine by means of supporting the Ukrainian forces with ever more and more potent weapons, real-time intelligence, and battlefield advice and guidance. Yet, the United States definitely does not want a head-on kinetic collision with Russia: should that happen, there is a high probability of the conflict going nuclear. The Russian military doctrine specifically provides for the use of nuclear weapons in case of an existential threat, which a Russian strategic defeat in Ukraine at the hands of Kyiv's U.S.-equipped/trained/supported forces would certainly be.[10]

Avoidance of a direct military collision with Russia remains a priority for the Biden administration. So far, it has been incrementally testing the limits of the possible, and until now generally successful. However, while Washington does largely control Kyiv's actions, it does not control Moscow's reactions. For example, Ukrainian strikes at Crimea which Kyiv and Washington regard as Ukrainian, but Moscow sees as Russia's sovereign territory. It can lead to more expansive Russian missile attacks than Ukraine has witnessed since the bombing of the Crimea Bridge in October 2022. As a result, American personnel in Ukraine might be affected. Another escalation risk – in case US-provided weapons begin to make a strategic impact on the battlefield - could be Russian strikes at U.S. logistical hubs in Poland and/or Romania that receive the bulk of

[10] "Moscow clarifies Putin's nuclear warning", Russia Today, September 23, 2022, https://www.rt.com/russia/563421-moscow-putin-nuclear-warning/ (accessed on November 6, 2022).

Western military supplies bound for Kyiv. Finally, NATO countries' attempts to block Russia's transit to and from the enclave of Kaliningrad, or to box the Russian Baltic Fleet in the Gulf of Finland, would lead to a significant escalation toward a direct Russia-NATO clash.

Such a clash is likely to lead, in short order, to the use of nuclear weapons. To some in the United States, a limited nuclear war overseas may appear extremely bad but bearable, particularly if its outcome turns out to be favourable to the U.S. and its allies. However, it would be absolutely naïve to count on Moscow playing by Washington's rules and deploying its tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine itself. In a March 2018 TV interview, President Putin memorably asked, "why should we need a world without Russia?" In the context the phrase was used, this was not an off-the-hand remark, but a carefully considered policy statement. Faced with an existential threat, Russia would not oblige Washington planners by sparing U.S. territory from its nuclear strike.

Reaching a post-conflict settlement in Ukraine will take a very long time. The issue at hand is to prevent the war in Ukraine from escalating into a nuclear catastrophe which would end the world as we have known it. Russia will rather double down than to give in, and the United States does not intend to concede. In this situation, the risks of conflict escalation are very real. In the war in Ukraine, Washington enjoys many advantages over Moscow, except in one thing which is of crucial importance. For Russia, the stakes are immensely higher, resulting in its willingness to escalate higher. If there is one thing to learn from the almost three decades of America and Russia moving toward this war, it is Washington's arrogant refusal to take Moscow's security concerns seriously. Now may be the last chance to pause and think. ■