



Russia and Ukraine: An Inflation of Conflict?

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At various points during the past decade, news items have highlighted the Russian propensity to deploy ‘blow-up weapons’: inflatable tanks, missile launchers and the like that were indistinguishable from the real thing when viewed via radar or satellite. This creates, however imperfectly or briefly, a deception as to Russia’s capabilities and projected power that in turn can change how the international community responds. Not bad for a tactic that was around in World War Two. But the recent troop deployments to the Ukrainian border are all too real, with most observers predicting that invasion is simply a matter of *when* and not *if*. No inflatable T-80s here, only the question of whether, after the Georgian invasion in 2008 and the Crimea annexation of 2014, this decade’s Russian aggression will be the most impactful yet seen. But amid the unknowns, there is a slight chance that this provocation could be itself, an ‘inflatable’ exercise on a grand scale – a decoy operation to shift the pieces of the international great game in Russia’s favour without having to commit to firing a shot.

The roots of Russia’s dissatisfaction are at once historical, geographical and political. Historical, because while she is still a superpower, the ‘glory days’ of the Soviet Union are gone. Geographical, because Russia deems swathes of territory in Eastern Europe to properly fall under its own jurisdiction and has resented the independence conferred by the dissolution of the USSR. And political, because Moscow deems NATO to be an existential threat to any aspirations she has of restoring these first two objectives. The annexation of the Crimea was simultaneously an offensive on all three fronts: enacting self-determination, regaining territory, and daring the rest of the world to do anything about it. In this last regard, the international response was weak: symbolic UN resolutions refusing to recognise the annexation but with firmer action made impossible by Russia’s veto, and sanctions that, while nominally significant, had no real effect on the political and military elite who simply ‘gamed the system’ as they had always done.

That the drums of war are beating again, fits both of these patterns to a T. Russia’s goal to regain its lost territory and honour remains intact, as does the intent to operate with absolute primacy in its sphere of influence. And US President Biden has already indicated that American troops will not be deployed, with the UK and EU unlikely to act unilaterally and NATO forces limited to the Baltic states and sea. What this adds up to is a situation whereby Russia would arguably be able to conduct a comprehensive invasion of eastern Ukraine and have an immediate territorial impact both in terms of military forces and separatist support, without seeing a proportionate or meaningful response.



But arguably, Russia does not need to do this in order to meet her needs. Firstly, Putin – as a former KGB chief – is acutely aware of the benefits of doing something without seeming to be doing it, or indeed to let somebody else do it for you. The installation of a pro-Moscow leader in Ukraine, through either outright manipulation of elections, ‘false flag’ operations or the simple pressure of social media on gullible minds, would achieve his immediate political goals while retaining an edge of plausible deniability and, were a restorative approach to USSR reunion be seen to be driven from Kiev, rather than Moscow, it would be harder for opponents to argue against it. (Much of the population in Crimea and the east of the country would have no problem with becoming Russian). Russia has also been pushing for the terms of the Minsk II Settlement to be implemented; this would mean autonomy for Donbass, a commitment to ending NATO expansion further eastwards, and acknowledgement of the new Russia-Ukraine border. Clearly, none of these are red line issues for the West or the settlement would not technically still be on the table, but a ‘political’ win for Russia would surely trump anything that can be gained through force of arms, and a presumed looming invasion that Ukrainian President Zelensky knows his Western allies will do nothing about in practical terms, could spur him to drop the long-held opposition and at least acknowledge the efficacy of the Settlement in preventing further bloody conflict.

There is also the question of just how supine the West would be in the face of Russian reprisals for any unified action. The implementation of further sanctions & assistance to Ukrainian forces would likely result in Moscow deploying the best weapon that it has: the power to raise gas prices. With much of Europe suffering from leaping costs already and the EU receiving 50% of its gas from Russia, this weaponization could force the West’s hand like no other measure could and would have a direct, measurable effect on the economic life of the country rather than the political platitudes. Certainly, for all the posturing and tough-talking as to ‘unbearable sanctions’ and measures ‘like none before seen’, the political calculus Putin is making is that the West will be far more likely to back down when he can directly squeeze their wallets rather than any sense of political or moral exactitude.

Through the deliberate mass mobilisation to levels not seen since the previous incursion, Russia is arguably playing a game of ‘chicken’ at the highest levels with not only Ukraine but the West in general, waiting to see who will blink first. While Putin’s ‘strongman’ image and his desire to return to the first principles of Mother Russia might ultimately necessitate a further military action, at present he has far more to be gained by ‘facing down’ the West on the international stage, as he arguably succeeded with in the Crimea back in 2014, and continuing to work behind the scenes in Ukraine and elsewhere in order to solidify Russia’s sphere of



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influence as something commonly accepted, rather than admitted at the barrel of a gun. By no means is an invasion off the cards, but as with any trick, one always tends to look where the magician wants you to.