Russia’s Gamble in Ukraine

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THE ISSUE
Russia is pursuing a dual approach in Ukraine, combining a major buildup of conventional forces with clandestine irregular activities. According to new CSIS analysis and satellite imagery, Moscow has prepared a growing number of its conventional army, navy, and air force units for a possible invasion of Ukraine and organized its intelligence services and military to conduct extensive cyber operations, subversion, and sabotage. If peace talks fail, an escalation between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia could extend well beyond Eastern Europe and include retaliatory measures that are global in nature.

INTRODUCTION
The CSIS Brief “Russia’s Possible Invasion of Ukraine” examined Russian political objectives and military options regarding Ukraine and explored options available to the United States and its allies and partners in case of an invasion. New events and information require additional analysis to further discern Russian intentions and their policy implications. To better understand recent developments, this brief asks two main questions. What might Russian military options now include? How should the United States and its allies and partners respond?

To answer these questions, CSIS conducted an extensive analysis of the latest satellite imagery of Russian ground, air, and naval forces; examined open-source information on Russian conventional and irregular activity; and assessed Russian invasion options. Based on this analysis, this brief makes three main arguments.

First, Russia has surrounded Ukraine on three sides with a conventional invasion force, highlighted in Figure 1, which poses an imminent threat to Ukraine. In addition, Moscow has prepared Russian air and naval forces to support a possible ground invasion.

Second, Russia may also conduct extensive irregular operations in Ukraine and against the West, including cyber operations, subversion, and sabotage by Russia’s intelligence services and special operations forces. These actions could extend far beyond Eastern Europe, such as Russian cyberattacks against U.S. critical infrastructure and sabotage operations against undersea fiber optic cables.

Third, the United States and its Western partners need to develop a strategy that combines deterrence and coercion. If Moscow invades or otherwise escalates its actions in Ukraine and other areas, the United States and its Western partners need to be prepared to conduct extensive diplomatic, economic, military, and information measures designed to protect NATO’s eastern flank and prevent Moscow from annexing any additional territory in Ukraine.

The rest of this brief is divided into three sections. The first provides an overview of the latest Russian military preparations. The second examines policy options for the United States and its allies and partners. The third section concludes with several questions that Western leaders need to continue asking—and answering—as the situation evolves.
RUSSIAN MILITARY PREPARATIONS

Russia’s goals include ending NATO expansion further eastward, rolling back NATO’s previous expansion, removing U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, and expanding Russia’s sphere of influence. Ukraine plays a particularly important role in Moscow’s strategic calculations because Ukrainian leaders have increasingly shifted their economic, political, and military allegiances to the West. In addition, President Vladimir Putin argued in his July 2021 article titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” which was compulsory reading for Russian forces, that Russia and Ukraine are one. “Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful,” Putin wrote. “For we are one people.”

Based on these political goals, Russia has at least six military options that it could execute:

1. Redeploy Russian ground forces away from the Ukrainian border but continue to aid pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine, conduct offensive cyber operations, and engage in other irregular activity in Ukraine and the region.
2. Send Russian troops into the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.
3. Seize Ukraine as far west as the Dniepr River.
4. Seize Ukraine up to the Dniepr River and an additional belt of land to connect Russia with Transdniestria along the Black Sea.
5. Seize just a belt of land between Russia and Transdniestria along the Black Sea.
6. Seize all of Ukraine.

Most of these options involve some aspect of combined-arms warfare, which the Russian military tested and refined in Syria. Russia developed advanced command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) field systems on the battlefield in Syria, providing data to

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**Figure 1: Russian Force Laydown around Ukraine**

Source: Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.
enable a higher throughput of airstrikes to support maneuver forces. These systems were integrated into Russia’s overarching systems of “reconnaissance strike complexes”—which were designed for the coordinated employment of high-precision, long-range weapons linked to real-time intelligence data and accurate targeting. Russia refined these technologies over time and integrated them with unmanned aerial systems such as the Orlan-10, Forpost, and Eleron-3SV; electronic warfare; and other intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

Moscow has positioned its military forces to pose an imminent threat to Ukraine. As highlighted in Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c, Russian forces in Yelnya, located near the Russian-Ukrainian border, include critical parts of an invasion force—such as main battle tanks, self-propelled howitzers, towed artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, surface-to-air missile systems, short-range ballistic missiles, and support vehicles. CSIS estimates that there has been a notable increase in the amount of military hardware in Yelnya, the headquarters of the 144th Guards Motorized Rifle Division. As Figure 2a highlights, the Russian military constructed at least eight new compounds between early November 2021 and late January 2022. In Figure 2b, there was a 45 percent increase in the number of vehicles, trailers, and structures at one compound. In Figure 2c, there were increases of 24 percent and 25 percent, respectively, in the number of tanks, self-propelled howitzers, and other weapons systems at two different compounds. The Russian military’s establishment of new compounds...
and growth in the number of weapons, vehicles, and structures in existing compounds clearly indicate a military buildup.

The rest of this section analyzes Russia’s deployment of forces into Belarus, the effect of reinforcing Russia’s Black Sea Fleet’s amphibious lift capability, Russian cyber and irregular operations, and the threat to Ukraine’s nuclear power plants.

**BELARUS**

On January 18, 2022, Interfax-Military News Agency announced a two-phased combined exercise between the Russian and Belarusian armed forces. The first phase is an air defense exercise for which 12 Su-35 fighters, two S-400 anti-aircraft missile battalions, and one shorter-range Pantsir-S anti-aircraft defense battalion deploy to Belarus. The second phase, Allied Resolve 2022, will take place between February 10 and 20 (the last day of the Olympic Games in Beijing). The entire Belarusian army of 45,000 will operate alongside 30,000–35,000 Russian troops deploying to Belarus from the Far East during Allied Resolve. This is the first-ever strategic level exercise that the Belarusian army has conducted in its entirety and in the winter, and the Belarusian armed forces have never conducted an exercise of this magnitude before even during the summer.³ The announced purpose of Allied Resolve 2022 is “to work out the tasks of suppressing and repelling external aggression during the conduct of a defensive operation, countering terrorism and protecting the interests of the Union State.”⁴

There is growing evidence that Russian forces not only arrived in Minsk but also transited Gomel, an important rail and road junction north of Kiev, to areas just across the

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**Figure 3: Possible Russian Seizure of Ukraine up to the Dnepr River**

border from Ukraine. Some Russian military equipment is located near the Ukrainian border away from any military training ground connected with the Allied Resolve exercises. Based on these developments, one possible Russian option is a flanking movement through Belarus to take Kiev from the rear via an axis of advance from Mazyr, Belarus, to Korosten, Ukraine, and into the capital—as highlighted in Figure 3.

The Allied Resolve exercise provides cover for positioning Russian forces for this maneuver but could serve several other objectives.

First, the well-publicized deployment of Russian forces into Belarus complicates Ukraine’s defensive posture by forcing it to keep reserves along its borders to respond to both a possible flanking movement toward Kiev and attacks further west. The Poles faced a similar situation after March 1939 when Nazi forces seized the rest of post-Munich Czechoslovakia, surrounding Poland on three sides.

Second, the deployment of Russian forces into Belarus could indicate intentions to invade further into Ukraine than just up to the east bank of the Dniepr River or along the Crimean coast, as highlighted in Figure 4. Russian forces coming from the north in conjunction with those crossing the Dniepr would put Ukrainian defenders in the difficult position of defending against Russian forces advancing from two separate directions. However, attacking south into Ukraine from the Belarusian border is not without difficulties. This area, known as the Polesie Marshes (or the Pripyat Marshes), consists of 104,000 square miles of dense forests, bogs, lakes, and rivers. Few roads (including north-south roads) traverse this

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**Figure 4: Possible Russian Seizure of Ukraine past the Dniepr River**

wilderness, and they are spaced far apart. The terrain is extremely difficult for the kinds of swift maneuverable armored warfare the Russian military prefers. In many ways, it is ideal for bogging down an invader.

Third, the alerting of the entire Belarusian army and the deployment of Russian forces into Belarus could indicate concerns by Minsk and Moscow of NATO intervention in the event of a war with Ukraine. The Russian deployment could be meant to assure Belarus that it will be protected against NATO air strikes and ensure its cooperation by the increased presence of Russian combat forces on its soil. While President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Boris Johnson have announced that they will not deploy U.S. or UK military forces to Ukraine, Russia and Belarus may nevertheless worry about NATO intervention, no matter how unlikely.

**THE BLACK SEA**
The limited amphibious lift capability of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, approximately two battalion tactical groups (BTG), and the vagaries of weather and sea conditions—including the limitations of hydrography and topography, the challenge of maintaining air superiority over a beachhead, and challenges of logistics—make amphibious operations along Ukraine’s Black Sea coast a risky affair. As Figure 5 highlights, Russia has naval assets in Sevastopol available for amphibious operations, such as Ropucha-class landing ships. However, six Russian amphibious assault ships from the Northern and the Baltic Fleets have begun deploying toward the Mediterranean Sea. If they enter the Black Sea, these ships would increase the amphibious lift capability of the Black Sea Fleet by approximately one reinforced BTG. This increased capability would ease, though not remove, Russian risks of conducting amphibious operations against Ukraine’s coast. Increasing the combat power ashore in the first wave of an assault from 2 to 3.5 BTGs provides for greater survivability of the beachhead. But these actions do not remove such obstacles, including the limited number of suitable beaches for landing armored forces and the turnaround time from landing the first wave to bringing second and third waves from Crimean ports. For an amphibious assault to seize the Ukrainian port city of Odessa, Russian forces could attempt a coup de main by sailing its amphibious ships straight into Odessa’s port and moving directly into the city.

Coupled with an airborne assault against the city’s airport and a helicopter assault to seize key points in the city, a direct assault could be successful. Still, the amount of combat power in 3.5 naval infantry BTGs landing ashore, another naval infantry BTG landing via helicopter, and 2
Russian army airborne BTGs parachuting into a nearby airport would number only 6,000 to 7,500 soldiers. Odessa has a population of a million and urban combat favors the defenders. These forces would be alone until a naval task force could return to land a second wave. Furthermore, if Ukrainian air defenses are not destroyed, reinforcement by air would be problematic. Even if these assault forces are reinforced by air and sea, they would still be in a precarious situation until a linkup is made with Russian army units approaching from the east. Consequently, any amphibious and airborne assault against Odessa would be a high gain but also a high-risk operation.

A better use of this increased amphibious lift capability could be to outflank Ukrainian defenses along the Isthmus of Perekop by landing along the western shore of the Kherson Oblast. Three naval infantry BTG’s put ashore behind the Isthmus of Perekop and supported by airborne and airmobile forces could outflank Ukrainian defenses and allow the Russian military in Crimea to break out into southern Ukraine. However, along that portion of the Kherson Oblast coast, there is only one area, approximately 15 miles long between the cities of Lazurne and Zaliznyi Port, with the hydrography to allow Russian amphibious shipping to land. Other coastal areas are either too shallow or unreachable due to offshore barrier islands.10 None of these challenges are insurmountable, but the costs of overcoming them could be high. The greatest impact Russia’s Black Sea amphibious force might have on any future conflict is simply by its presence. An amphibious task force will fix in place Ukrainian reserves near Odessa and Kherson just as forces in Belarus will force Ukraine to keep reserves in the north and away from fighting near Kiev and along the Dnepr. While attacks through the Polesie marshes and over the Black Sea beaches could be complicated and costly, Ukraine would not be able to ignore these possibilities and leave these areas undefended.

**IRREGULAR ACTIVITIES**

Russia may also pursue a mix of cyber and other irregular operations against Ukraine and the West, including cyber espionage, information and disinformation operations, and disruptive cyberattacks. Perpetrators could include UNC2452, Turla, APT28, UNC530, UNC1151, UNC806, and other actors tied to intelligence services in Russia, Belarus, and other countries.11 On January 14, for example, hackers defaced the official website of Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a message in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian, stating, “Be afraid and expect the worst.” A separate malware attack wiped data clean from dozens of computers belonging to several Ukrainian government agencies.12 Recent news sources citing intelligence reporting indicated that Belarusian proxies may have played a part in these attacks.13 These attacks continue the psychological pressure Russia is exerting on Ukraine and foreshadow what could happen to Ukraine’s military command and control and infrastructure systems in the event of an invasion. However, a cyber war is unlikely to stay in Ukraine.

In 2017, a Russian cyberattack called “NotPetya” against Ukrainian private companies spread to computers and servers worldwide, causing billions of dollars of damage. NotPetya affected international shipping ports, multinational companies, and almost anyone who paid taxes or did business with Ukraine.14 The West can expect similar attacks if Russia invades Ukraine. This time, however, cyberattacks are likely to be directed at the United States and other Western government and private sector targets, not just the result of malware spiraling out of control. If the United States and its allies and partners impose economic sanctions against Russia for again attacking Ukraine, the Kremlin may impose its own economic sanctions on the West via cyberattacks—including against the financial sector.

Russian intelligence and military agencies are also supporting paramilitary actors in Ukraine to conduct sabotage and subversion. The highest density of Russian-backed units appears to be in eastern Ukraine, where Russia has provided tanks, small arms, mobile artillery, fuel, training, and other aid to separatist rebels.15 Russian forces have helped create, sustain, and fund separatist political parties in Ukraine; established and aided paramilitary groups such as the Russian Orthodox Army and the Night Wolves; and recruited Cossack, Chechen, Serbian, and Russian paramilitaries to fight in Ukraine.16 But this Russian assistance to groups in Ukraine appears to be growing. One use of these groups may be in sabotage and other irregular warfare or “fifth column” activities in the capital of Kiev or in the rear of Ukrainian military forces while Russian conventional forces advance from the east. In addition, the Kremlin has developed plans to install a pro-Russian leader in Ukraine, according to British intelligence, possibly via a coup.17

Russia may also conduct other types of sabotage and subversion in retaliation for Western sanctions. For example, Russian military and intelligence agencies could
target the undersea fiberoptic cables that connect Europe to North America. This extensive network of cables runs under the Atlantic Ocean and powers texts, calls, global financial transactions, and the internet. Approximately 97 percent of all intercontinental data moves through these cables.\textsuperscript{18} In January 2022, Russian naval vessels conducted military exercises off the coast of Ireland and in close proximity to the fiberoptic cables, raising concerns about Russian sabotage.\textsuperscript{19} Russia could also target other European fiberoptic cables, such as those between the Norwegian mainland and Norwegian-administered Svalbard.\textsuperscript{20} The United Kingdom’s chief of the defence staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, raised alarm bells in January 2022 that Russian vessels—including submarines—could cut critical underwater communications cables.\textsuperscript{21} Finally, Russia could also attempt a range of economic measures, such as impacting oil and gas prices and banning such exports as titanium, copper, wheat, and corn to Western markets.

**THE NUCLEAR DIMENSION**

Among the military gear that arrived in Belarus from the Russian Far East was a trainload of equipment likely from the 16th Radiation, Biological, and Chemical Defense Brigade.\textsuperscript{22} The deployment of a nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) warfare unit required valuable railway car space that could have been allocated to another BTG or a logistics unit. The Russian military believed that it was a higher priority to deploy this unit instead of others. A logical assumption is that Russian leaders expect it could be needed and used.

The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is a 1,000 square mile area north of Kiev, which is highlighted in Figures 3 and 4. To its north in Belarus is the Polesie State Radioecological Reserve of 835 square miles. Both sites were created due to the fallout from the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster. The main danger to persons visiting the zone comes from being exposed to the radiation that permeates the soil, and visitors are warned not to sit on the ground or touch plants as a precaution.

The presence of the NBC unit in Belarus may indicate that the Russian military could shorten its approach by traveling along the edges of the exclusion zones or through it, instead of advancing along the axis of Mazyr-Korosten-Kiev, to outflank the capital. Military activity in these zones—such as the travel of wheeled and tracked vehicles over dirt roads—would stir up the soil and expose soldiers and vehicles to the residual radiation from the 1986 disaster. If Ukrainian forces defended the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, infantry soldiers would have to disembark from their vehicles and fight—possibly for several days—through the zone’s forests and fields. Pity the poor infantryman on either side who must dig a foxhole and live in it for several days in or around this residual radiation. However, this option illustrates the utility of deploying NBC decontamination units to Belarus and a possible reason for their presence.

The Russians may have deployed NBC decontamination units for another reason: the danger of nuclear contamination from Ukrainian nuclear power plants damaged during combat. Ukraine has 15 active nuclear reactors at four nuclear power plants, as highlighted in Figures 3 and 4, which produce a quarter of the country’s electrical power. The nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia on the east bank of the Dnepr is one of the world’s largest and could be in the direct path of a central thrust through Ukraine by Russian forces. The other three plants are located west of the Dnepr, two of them near Ukraine’s border with Belarus and another approximately 80 miles northeast of Odessa.\textsuperscript{23}

There has never been a major conventional war near so many active nuclear power plants, and the deployment of NBC decontamination units likely recognizes the worst-case scenario that Russian forces may operate in or around nuclear contaminated areas. A Chernobyl-style meltdown of a reactor core due to combat would not just endanger local inhabitants and nearby soldiers on both sides, but easterly winds would carry radiation into Russia. This is especially true of any damage to the six reactors at Zaporizhzhia, which is approximately 200 miles from the border with Russia and less than 125 miles from Donetsk.

**THE U.S. AND WESTERN RESPONSE**

Based on possible Russian actions, this section considers potential steps to defend Ukraine against possible Russian aggression.

**DEFENSE OF UKRAINE**

With enough troops, firepower, logistics, time, national will, and no outside interference, Russia could grind away until its military achieves the Kremlin’s political objectives regarding Ukraine. Even with the support of Russian naval and air units—including assets such as Su-34 “Fullback” fighter bombers highlighted in Figure 6 at Voronezh Air Base in Russia—combat in the winter is not easy, and there are several actions that Ukraine’s military could take to improve their odds. There are also actions that can be taken prior to an invasion that could prove beneficial for Ukraine in slowing down a Russian advance to the Dnepr and beyond.\textsuperscript{24}
First, logistics is the Achilles’ heel for any military, and Russia’s military is dependent on railways for bringing up supplies and reinforcements. Ukraine can conduct some actions now that impose pain later on Russia by closing the railways connecting the two countries. Once they are closed, rails and sleepers could be removed along miles of track, and railway embankments and bridges could be prepared for destruction. As soon as any Russian tank, missile, or soldier crosses Ukraine’s borders, these could be destroyed. The same could be done for major road bridges near the Russian-Ukraine border. While the Russian army is unique in having railway units that can repair such damage, this will take time and repairs could be hindered by combat operations.

Second, Ukraine has its own cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, and these should be directed against Russian command and control centers and logistics nodes if war begins. Any Russian invasion moving over 100,000 soldiers and tens of thousands of vehicles would be hamstrung if railways and major transportation hubs were to lose power and military headquarters found their computers partially or wholly inoperable.

Third, Ukrainian forces have shown in the past an ability to conduct innovative maneuver warfare operations against superior forces. They have also shown an ability to conduct the hardest of military operations, a retreat under fire, and regroup to fight again. For example, in early August 2014, Ukraine’s 95th Air Assault Brigade (Mechanized) conducted one of the largest and longest mechanized raids behind enemy lines in history. The brigade attacked on multiple parallel axes of advance, penetrated separatist positions, and regrouped in their rear. It then maneuvered for 120 miles east along the southern border of the Donbas, destroyed or captured Russian tanks and artillery, rescued Ukrainian units that had been cut off, and returned to its starting position (with the captured tanks and artillery) after a mechanized march of approximately 250 miles.

During the Battle of Debaltseve from July 2014 to February 2015, a reinforced Ukrainian mechanized brigade defended a key road-rail junction for five months and withdrew only after massive armored and artillery strikes cut them off. Ukrainian soldiers had to abandon their equipment and retreat on foot through the wooded countryside. But they then regrouped and established a new defensive line 20 miles to the rear.

While two vignettes from 2014 and 2015 do not make the case that the Ukrainian army can defeat the Russian army, it does indicate that the Ukrainian army has shown a capability...
for bold and decisive maneuver warfare operations, can hold ground under sustained pressure, and can withdraw in good order to set up new lines of defenses. These are the military skills necessary to face a Russian invasion while outnumbered. The Russian army has numerous advantages and has spent over a decade reforming and improving its military capabilities. However, it is not invincible or immune to challenges of weather, logistics, and a motivated enemy.

U.S. Army captain Nicolas Fiore studied Russian BTG tactics during combat operations in Ukraine from 2014 to 2015, and the above two vignettes are taken from his work. After analyzing numerous Russian combat operations in eastern Ukraine, he noted Russian army strengths but also weaknesses. On several occasions, Russian BTGs were defeated by Ukrainian regular army units despite an overmatch in firepower, electronic warfare, and air defense artillery capabilities. During the fighting in eastern Ukraine, Russian BTGs could not quickly regenerate combat power. Once teams and units were degraded by casualties, they rapidly lost effectiveness until they were completely reconstituted. Regarding logistics, Russian BTGs required road and bridge networks because their light trucks did not have the same mobility as their combat vehicles. This lack of logistics support may have prevented Russian BTGs from pursuing defeated Ukrainian units, which were often able to reform themselves less than 30 miles from their old positions. Other weak points were an overreliance on artillery, a limited number of infantrymen in each BTG to hold ground and conduct security operations, a risk aversion to endangering infantrymen and infantry fighting vehicles, an overworked command and control system, and limited medical evacuation and field treatment resources for the wounded.

Despite the challenge of facing Russian forces on three sides of their territory, Ukraine’s armed forces could sustain a defense against an invading Russian force if they can strike Russian logistics and command and control assets and attrit Russian airpower. The longer the war lasts and the more costly it is for Russia, the greater the chances are for Ukraine to survive if there is sufficient Western assistance.

**U.S. AND WESTERN ACTION**

The United States and its allies and partners should consider several steps to deter Russian aggression in Ukraine and to coerce a withdrawal if Russia invades. First, the United States needs to provide leadership to a divided alliance. As during the Cold War, there are—and will continue to be—different views among the United States’ Western allies and partners. Germany has prohibited Estonia from exporting German-origin weapons to Ukraine—including the D-30, a howitzer that fires a 122-mm shell roughly 20 kilometers. Germany has also been hesitant to consider imposing sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline and other pressure points, including cutting Russia out of the SWIFT bank transfer system. British Royal Air Force planes flew around Germany while delivering anti-tank weapons to Ukraine to avoid a stand-off with German leaders. In addition, French president Emmanuel Macron remarked that European Union countries should engage with Russia independently of the United States. “It is good that Europeans and the United States coordinate, but it is necessary that Europeans conduct their own dialogue,” Macron said.

These differences are neither surprising nor uncommon. Cold War crises led to numerous disagreements among NATO countries, from the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 to martial law in Poland in 1981. Ultimately, however, NATO countries stuck together with the help of U.S. leadership. Today, the stakes are much higher than just Ukraine. Authoritarianism is on the march—thanks to Russia, China, and other regimes—with 15 consecutive years of declining global freedom. As the New York-based organization Freedom House glumly concludes, “The long democratic recession is deepening.”

U.S. leadership will be particularly important since Moscow will attempt to exploit seams in U.S. and Western responses and policies. During Russian military operations in Syria, for example, Russian leaders used diplomatic efforts to lock in ceasefires to advance their military objectives. Moscow systematically and consistently exploited the diplomatic processes in the West for its military advantage. In some cases, Russia intensified military activity, locked in those gains with a ceasefire, temporarily reduced hostilities to rest and refit, incrementally violated the agreements to set the stage for new military advances, and then increased military operations when diplomatic arrangements collapsed.

Second, the United States and its Western allies and partners need to provide military assistance to Ukraine if the Russian threat persists—including anti-tank guided missiles (such as Javelins), man-portable air defense systems (such as Stingers), anti-ship missiles (such as air- and ground-launched Harpoons), cyber defense support, electronic warfare equipment, and other aid. If Russian conventional forces succeed in seizing Ukrainian territory, the United States and Europe should assist Ukrainian irregular efforts in Ukraine and in nearby outside
sanctuaries. Finland, Switzerland, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have developed plans, capabilities, and tactics to resist a foreign—including a Russian—invasion. Examples of aid to support a Ukrainian resistance might include:

- Increase NATO strategic communications efforts to counter Russian information warfare and disinformation campaigns.
- Provide communications and support equipment, such as tactical radios, mobile computing, satellite phones, unmanned aerial vehicles, night vision devices, and power generators.
- Offer non-military supplies to sustain resistance cells, including clothing, shelter materials, medical supplies, food, water purification tools, cash, power sources, and vehicles.
- Supply demolition materiel, such as explosives, fuses, and mines.

Third, the United States and other NATO countries need to reinforce NATO’s eastern flank to protect against future Russian activity. The United States has indicated that elements of the 82nd Airborne Division and 101st Airmobile Division could be deployed to Eastern Europe as part of a package of 8,500 U.S. military forces. The United States has other forces it could deploy to NATO’s eastern flank—at least temporarily. The U.S. Army has a rotational brigade combat team in Europe for Atlantic Resolve (1st Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 1st Infantry Division), in addition to the 1st Cavalry Division’s Combat Aviation Brigade. The ABCT has approximately 3,800 soldiers, 80 tanks, 130 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, 15 Paladins, more than 500 tracked vehicles, and more than 1,500 wheeled vehicles and equipment. The U.S. Army also approximately 1,000 soldiers in Europe for a multinational exercise as a part of Allied Spirit 22. In addition, the 4th Security Force Assistance Brigade is deployed to Europe, and the 1st Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division is the rotational brigade for U.S. Central Command that can be tapped if needed. Elements of II Marine Expeditionary Force are also deployed to Norway for exercises. These forces could be utilized if necessary.

Russian ground forces in Ukraine would pose a serious threat to NATO, including countries located near Ukraine’s western border, such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. As highlighted in Figures 7 and 8 at Russian bases in Soloti and Klintsy, respectively, a Russian invasion could place Russian main battle tanks, self-propelled artillery howitzers, towed artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, surface-to-air missile systems, and other equipment on—or within striking distance of—their borders.

**Figure 7: Russian Forces in Soloti, Russia**
Fourth, the United States and its Western allies and partners need to be prepared to escalate economic sanctions, if necessary. Examples include imposing export controls, such as using the foreign direct product rule to damage Russian industries that use microelectronics based on U.S. equipment, software, or technology—from artificial intelligence and quantum computing to civilian aerospace. The United States could also apply the foreign direct product rule more broadly in a way that would potentially deprive Russian citizens of some smartphones, tablets, and video game consoles. Such moves would expand the reach of U.S. sanctions beyond financial targets.

Fifth, Russia’s actions in Ukraine should provide the impetus that has been lacking for European militaries to build their lagging capabilities. European states lack sufficient heavy maneuver forces, airlift, naval combatants, missile defense, and support capabilities, such as logistics and fire support.

LINGERING QUESTIONS

There are several policy questions that U.S. and other Western leaders need to grapple with during the crisis:

- How will the United States and the West deal with Belarusian complicity—by providing its territory for transit, providing logistical support, or serving as a proxy for covert actions against Ukraine—in another invasion of Ukraine? Will the same sanctions levied on Russia for its actions extend to Belarus?
- How will the United States and the West deal with nations such as China and Iran who assist Russia in evading Western sanctions? China already undercuts U.S. sanctions and nonproliferation efforts against Iran and North Korea, and it is conceivable that it would do the same for Russia.
- How prepared are the United States and the West to deal with large-scale disruptions of critical infrastructure and their own military command and control systems as a result of direct or indirect cyberattacks? What warnings or “redlines” will be communicated to Russia? What will be the response to inexplicable disruptions during this crisis to the world’s network of undersea telecommunications cables? What will be the response to similar disruptions of satellite systems?
- How will the United States and NATO or the European Union deal with a Level 7 nuclear event in Ukraine as a result of this war? A Level 7 nuclear event is a major release of radioactive material with widespread health and environmental effects. The
only two such events in history to date have been Chernobyl and Fukushima.

- If Russia occupies Kiev and major portions of Ukrainian territory, what will be the West’s policy to the new Ukrainian government installed by Moscow? It is conceivable that there could emerge competing Ukraines—a West Ukraine and East Ukraine. The issues faced by the West regarding West Germany and East Germany—including West and East Berlin—would resurface. Taiwan and China will be particularly interested in how the United States and the West handle this issue.

- If all of Ukraine is conquered, will the United States and the West recognize this *fait accompli* and the “new” Ukrainian government, or is the United States prepared to recognize a government-in-exile even if that exile lasts for decades? What will happen to Ukraine’s current diplomatic platforms overseas and other assets such as shipping, airplanes, and foreign holdings?

- If Russia invades Ukraine, are the United States and NATO prepared to spend the resources required to reestablish a credible conventional military deterrent force on the continent—including in Eastern Europe—and keep it there for as long as necessary?

**DE-ESCALATION AND OFF RAMPS**

While it is impossible to answer all of these questions now, they need to be asked. Hopefully, war can still be averted. The Cold War saw similar crises, such as over the status of Berlin, but Western strength and adroit diplomacy helped keep the peace.

Could de-escalation happen now after the past several months of threats and ultimatums? Could Moscow and Washington find an off ramp? The announcement that the Russian Duma will hold hearings soon to discuss recognizing the independence of the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics could be one sign. On the surface, it is a provocative move. But it could allow Russia to claim success in defending Donetsk and Luhansk against Ukrainian “aggression” and protecting Russian vital interests. Ukraine would have to deal with part of its country broken away and under at least nominal Russian protection, as has Moldova regarding Transdniestria and Georgia with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Such a development would be an affront to Ukrainian sovereignty but not a threat to its survival and would not be recognized by the West. It would essentially reflect the status quo that exists now.

Another sign could be Putin’s recent threats to place military architecture in Cuba or Venezuela. While this has been seen as another provocative move and kindled fears of a new Cuban Missile Crisis, it could allow Putin to say that he has fulfilled his threat to take “retaliatory military-technical measures” if the United States does not agree to his demands regarding Ukraine and NATO expansion. When Putin made this threat in late December 2021, it was assumed that “military-technical measures” meant an invasion of Ukraine. However, placing units in Cuba or Venezuela would allow Putin to say he has fulfilled that threat by putting some Russian military assets close to the United States. While it is certainly important what type of Russian units are put in these countries, Putin could claim victory in the crisis of his own making and withdraw Russian troops away from Ukraine without losing face. The United States will still have overwhelming conventional military superiority to deal with any crisis in the Western Hemisphere.

President Putin still has time to find an off ramp in a crisis that he created. The United States and the West should also be prepared to de-escalate without undermining the security of Ukraine and NATO. But if Moscow decides to invade Ukraine, the United States and its allies and partners must be prepared to respond. In his 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article titled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Cold War diplomat George F. Kennan remarked:

> [T]he thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin’s challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.

The U.S. leadership that Kennan described is increasingly essential.

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The authors give special thanks to Jared Thompson, Grace Hwang, and Kateryna Halstead for their outstanding research assistance, as well as to Jennifer Jun for her assistance with satellite imagery. The authors also give special thanks to Michelle Macander, Matthew Strohmeyer, Danielle Ngo, and Brian McSorley for their helpful comments.

This brief is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this brief.
ENDNOTES


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