



Russia's Losing Hand in Ukraine

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THE ISSUE

The United States and its partners and allies should be prepared to conduct a sustained diplomatic, economic, military, and humanitarian campaign that supports Ukraine and raises the financial and military costs for Moscow of meddling in Ukraine—both now and in the future. Russia has several weaknesses that can be exploited, and Ukrainian nationalism and Western resolve could present formidable, long-term problems for Moscow.

INTRODUCTION

A Russian overthrow of the Ukrainian government through a combination of conventional and irregular means would be a seminal event in international politics, with far-reaching implications that go well beyond Ukraine. A Russian incursion into eastern Ukraine in coordination with Russian-backed separatists, short of a full-scale invasion, would also be a serious concern. With 15 consecutive years of declining democracy, authoritarianism is gaining momentum.¹ Afghanistan fell to the Taliban last year. Ukraine would be another democracy to fall. The illiberalism at the root of the Russian, Chinese, and other systems is antithetical to Western Enlightenment values. These regimes eschew freedom of the press, freedom of religion, free markets, and democracy.

A Russian invasion could also place Russian forces close to countries that are part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. In Asia, Taiwan would be on alert about possible Chinese movements to threaten the island. While some analysts have argued that Ukraine is a distraction from a U.S. focus on China, the two are linked. Russian

successes in Ukraine would likely embolden Chinese leaders and highlight a declining West.

However the crisis is resolved—through diplomacy, military conflict, or a combination of the two—Russia's military buildup and threat to Ukraine is deeply concerning. To better understand recent developments, this brief asks: what options do the United States and its partners and allies have to respond to a whole or partial Russian seizure of Ukraine? To answer this question, the brief conducts an extensive analysis of the latest satellite imagery of Russian forces; examines open-source information on Russian conventional and irregular activity; and assesses U.S. and Western options. Two previous briefs, "Russia's Possible Invasion of Ukraine" and "Russia's Gamble in Ukraine," examined Russian political objectives and military options.²

This brief makes three main arguments. First, the complete or partial loss of Ukraine to Russia—either now or in the future—would be significant for the United States and its allies and partners, with second- and third-order ripple effects in Europe, Asia, and other regions. It would signal the advance of authoritarian regimes and a further weakening of the West. Second, Russia has several weaknesses that can be exploited. Russian

president Vladimir Putin’s economy is still sluggish and grappling with growing inflation. Russia faces high income inequality and inefficient social safety nets, and the government is riddled with cronyism and corruption. Third, the United States and its partners and allies need to conduct a sustained campaign to provide diplomatic, economic, military, and humanitarian support to Ukraine, exploit Russian weaknesses, and raise the financial and human costs for Moscow of an invasion. Even if there is a temporary de-escalation to the current crisis, which would be a positive outcome, Moscow is unlikely to stop meddling in Ukraine.

The rest of this brief is divided into three sections. First, it examines recent Russian military developments. Second, it outlines steps Ukraine could take to counter Russian aggression. Third, it explores U.S. and other Western diplomatic, military, economic, intelligence, and other steps to support Ukraine.

RUSSIAN ACTIONS

Russia has deployed up to 190,000 conventional and irregular ground forces—in addition to naval and air forces— which could conduct operations in Ukraine.³ Russia has surrounded Ukraine on three sides, as highlighted in Figure 1. Russia’s military footprint around Ukraine has increased to 105 battalion tactical groups (BTGs), from 83 groups only a few weeks ago. A BTG has between 600 and 1,000 troops, who are equipped with their own artillery, air defense systems, and logistics. Russia has also deployed roughly 500 combat aircraft within striking distance of Ukraine and has 40 combat ships deployed to the Black Sea.⁴

Russia has demonstrated a major ground presence in such areas as:

- Brest, Pinsk, Mazyr, Yelsk, Rechytsa, and Gomel in Belarus (including troops and personnel from the Eastern Military District and 98th Airborne Division);

Figure 1: Russian Forces around Ukraine



Source: Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

Figure 2a: Overview of Dzhankoi Air Base, Crimea



- Klinttsy, Klimovo, Unecha, and Pochep in the southern Bryansk region of Russia (including elements of the 90th Tank Division and 41st Combined Arms Army);
- Postoyalnye Dvory, Vesnyolaya Lopan, Korenevo, and Belgorod in the Kursk and Belgorod regions of Russia (including elements of the 6th Combined Arms Army);
- Rostov-on-Don in the Rostov region of Russia (including elements of the 8th Guards Combined Arms Army); and
- Slavne, Dzhankoi, Oktyabrskoye, Kerch, and Novoozernoye in Crimea (including elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army and 49th Army of the Southern Military District).

Figure 2b: Attack Aircraft and Helicopters, Dzhankoi Air Base, Crimea



In addition, Moscow has prepared Russian air and naval forces to support military operations in Ukraine. At Dzhankoi air base in Crimea, shown in Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c, Russia has deployed Ka-52 and Mi-28 attack helicopters, S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, Mi-26 and An-26 transport helicopters, and MiG-29 fighter aircraft.

Figure 2c: S-400 Anti-Aircraft Missile System, Dzhankoi Air Base, Crimea



In addition, Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, passed a resolution requesting that President Putin recognize two Russian-backed separatist republics in eastern Ukraine as independent states. Such a move would represent Russia's abandonment of the 2015 Minsk II peace plan for those territories and could set the stage for Russia to openly move its armed forces into those areas. Russian-backed rebels claim all of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions but control only about one-third of the territory.

Russia may also conduct extensive irregular operations in Ukraine and

Figure 3a: Overview of Buhaivka Training Area, Ukraine



Figure 3b: Tanks, Towed Artillery, and Other Equipment at Buhaivka Training Area, Ukraine



Figure 3c: Combined Arms Task Force at Buhaivka Training Area, Ukraine



against the West, including cyber, disinformation, psychological, subversion, and sabotage operations by Russia's intelligence services, special operations forces, and Russian-backed separatists. There is already significant Russian equipment *inside* Ukraine. Figures 3a, 3b, and 3c show Russian-manufactured main battle tanks, self-propelled artillery, armored personnel carriers, and towed artillery at the Buhaivka training area, which is located roughly 20 miles southwest of Luhansk. Irregular actions could also extend far beyond Ukraine, such as Russian cyberattacks against U.S. and Western critical infrastructure and sabotage operations against transatlantic undersea fiber-optic cables and other targets.

UKRAINIAN RESPONSES

Concern that war with Ukraine may not be in Russia's best interests is percolating through Russia's national security community.⁵ Two retired Russian officers, Colonel General Leonid Ivashov and Colonel Mikhail Khodarenok, warned in Russian defense publications that a Russian invasion of Ukraine may not go as easily as some assume. Even if victorious in battle, they argue that the war could be counterproductive for Russia.⁶ Neither Ivashov, who heads a Russian veterans organization dedicated to strengthening Russia's military, nor Khodarenok, who served in the Operations Directorate of the Russian General Staff, can be considered pro-Western foreign agents or dilettantes in military strategy.

Additionally, as early as December 1, 2021, the head of the Russian Academy of Science's Center for Ukrainian Research, Viktor Mironenko, warned that Ukraine could become another Afghanistan.⁷

While all of these analysts argue that Russia could eventually defeat Ukraine, they believe that a war would still be counterproductive and costly. The fact that such articles were published and have not been taken off their websites, like other publications that displease the Kremlin, indicates that these views may have the support of some individuals in the Kremlin.

The article by Colonel Khodarenok is most revealing. He argues against a war because (1) the Ukrainians will strongly resist; (2) the effects of Russian firepower are overestimated and advanced weapons systems have limited supplies of ammunition; (3) air superiority has not always translated into victory in Moscow's previous wars; (4) the Ukrainian air force and air defense forces, however limited, will draw blood just as even the less capable Georgians did in 2008; and (5) urban combat will draw even more blood.⁸

Despite these cautions, a military incursion may still be possible. In their work on prospect theory, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky outlined how actors operating in the domain of losses—where some level of sunk cost creates a more certain possibility of losing something—tend to be risk seeking. Putin, in this case, has created an international expectation of, and even international acquiescence to, an invasion.⁹ This tacit acceptance, a necessary though perhaps insufficient condition for Putin to achieve his aims of blocking Ukraine from NATO, is still a significant achievement. Ukraine and the West should not discount the possibility that even if pressure grows in Russia to seek an off-ramp, Putin will be more risk tolerant in the face of losing a near-term opportunity to invade.

Based on these concerns, Ukrainian forces with NATO help could counter Russian aggression by preparing to erode Russian army logistics and airpower through a focused use of its new territorial defense forces and the innovative provision of advanced air defense systems. Even if Russian forces seize territory, a Ukrainian guerrilla campaign could bog down Russian forces through sabotage, subversion, ambushes, and bombings. The rest of this section examines several factors that could raise the costs for Russia in a protracted war.

Ukraine's Territorial Defense Force: While regular Ukrainian ground forces may conduct operations to engage Russian army units advancing westward, Ukraine's reserve forces and citizen volunteers should focus on defending major urban areas. The purpose of this tactic is first to draw Russian units into urban combat to attrit BTGs of their limited number of

infantry. The BTGs have numerous vehicles and substantial firepower, but limited amounts of infantry to get out of those vehicles and fight. Attrit them and you make the BTGs an empty shell. High infantry losses would also lower civilian morale in Russia due to high casualties. Second, this tactic would prevent Russian logistics units from using key road and rail junctions and severely impede resupply and refueling efforts. This would slow Russian momentum and make its BTGs more vulnerable to counterattacks by Ukrainian armor and artillery.

A new Ukrainian law on January 1, 2022, created a Territorial Defense Force as a separate military branch of its armed forces, but standing up this force has been slow.¹⁰ Under threat of imminent invasion, Ukraine should focus its efforts on providing civilian volunteers with a recognizable uniform or insignia visible at a distance, a formal chain of command, and instruction in following the Law of Armed Conflict, which would permit them to receive Geneva Conventions status as lawful combatants. The West should make it clear that failure by Russia to respect the Geneva Conventions with respect to these and all other combatants will result in not only more severe sanctions but also post-war prosecutions whenever and wherever possible. These newly raised forces do not need sophisticated weapons for urban combat. Standard Soviet-era Kalashnikov rifles, PK machine guns, RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers, and hand grenades are extremely effective in such fighting and easy for new volunteers to learn how to use effectively.

While regular, reserve, and territorial defense forces are fighting the Russian advance, Ukraine can also degrade Russian logistics via cyberattacks against rail networks in Ukraine and leading into Ukraine. Recent cyberattacks by Belarusian dissidents show the way, and it is helpful that a number of the Ukrainian rail lines are electrified and more susceptible to cyber interference against control stations and power sources.¹¹

Time favors the Ukrainians. By spring, Russian forces would have to deal with the infamous *Rasputitsa*, or thaw, which turns firm ground to mud and presents a serious challenge for mechanized forces. The longer their forces can hold out and inflict casualties on Russian forces, the greater their chance of undermining Russian morale at home and causing the Kremlin to reconsider a protracted war. Breaking the logistics chain needed to support a massive number of troops and mechanized vehicles is one way to do this. Another way is to destroy Russian confidence in the value of their numerical superiority in

Figure 4a: Overview of Luninets Air Base, Belarus



Figure 4b: Attack Aircraft and Helicopters at Luninets Air Base, Belarus



Figure 4c: Artillery Battalion at Luninets Air Base, Belarus



combat aircraft, attack helicopters, and surface-to-surface missiles.

Air Defense for Hire: Ukraine has a limited but not inconsequential number of Soviet-era air defense missile and gun systems, and these have been recently supplemented by shipments of man-portable surface-to-air missile launchers. However, negating Russia’s numerical advantage in the air will require further reinforcement of Ukraine’s air defenses in both quality and quantity. Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c provide an overview of Luninets air base in Belarus, including Russian Su-25 ground attack aircraft, Ka-25 attack helicopters, and an artillery battalion with 122-mm D-30 howitzers.

Since the training time for operators and maintenance personnel of most modern air defense systems is measured in months, if not a year, foreign military sales of such systems are a moot point for a conflict that could happen at any moment. If an advanced air defense system—such as the U.S. Patriot, Israeli David’s Sling, or British Sky Saber—was provided immediately as part of a lend-lease program, Ukraine could significantly increase its air defense capabilities. These systems could be accompanied by civilian contractors hired by the Ukrainian government to man and maintain these systems.

A similar program could provide Ukraine with more advanced electronic warfare capabilities as well. This entails great personal risk for the contractors. But civilian contractors have provided similar support in dangerous battlefields, including in Afghanistan and Iraq. If private contractors can run security convoys through the streets of Baghdad and escort supply convoys through eastern Afghanistan, they

can certainly fulfill this mission in Ukraine. More lethal Ukrainian air defense systems would undermine Russian confidence that they can again be invulnerable in the air as in Syria or Chechnya.

Lawfare: Dictatorial regimes regularly abuse international law to undermine law-abiding societies and to pursue or harass regime opponents worldwide. However, the law in its proper context—to protect life, liberty, and property—can be a tool to punish aggression. In 2017, Ukraine submitted a lawsuit against the Russian Federation in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) claiming Russian violations of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. These are treaties that Russia signed. Ukraine charged Russia with sponsoring terrorism by supplying arms to proxies in Donetsk and Luhansk who targeted civilians, shooting down Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014, and shelling Ukrainian civilian populations. In addition, Ukraine accused Russia of waging a campaign of “cultural erasure” in Crimea, including the suppression of the Tatar and Ukrainian languages, forced disappearances, and murder.¹²

This lawsuit is still pending before the ICJ. An outright attack by Russia in violation of the United Nations Charter, even if supported by a “false flag” operation, would give Ukraine status to file an additional lawsuit. Other venues that Ukraine could use to charge Russia for damage to life, limb, and property from an attack include the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

Russia would likely never agree to pay damages for any of its actions in Ukraine. But the judgment of an international tribunal, such as the ICJ or the ECHR, could be enforced in jurisdictions where Russia has assets separate and apart from their diplomatically immune property. This could include property clandestinely owned by Russia’s intelligence services, as well as property in which the Russian Presidential Administration, or the president of Russia, is the ultimate owner. Assuming Ukraine could obtain a judgment from an international tribunal, it would be a tedious and time-consuming effort to identify such assets. But a concerted effort could lift the veil on the ways in which the Russian government has hid substantial assets in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹³ The Ukrainian government could also pursue judgments against Russian aggression in individual nations that have laws such as the Magnitsky Act, which allows freezing assets of human rights abusers.

This legal approach would strike hardest at the ruling kleptocratic clique in the Kremlin, who own assets such as bank accounts in the City of London to villas in southern France. Fear of such actions may be behind the movement of President Putin’s purported superyacht on February 9, 2022, from Germany to Kaliningrad before repairs were completed.¹⁴ Furthermore, unlike most sanctions, the goal of legal action would be to compensate the people most harmed by Russian aggression by financing reconstruction and redevelopment when peace eventually comes. These actions would also be consistent with pledges made by 111 participants at the virtual Summit for Democracies held December 9 and 10, 2021, to strengthen democracy and defend against authoritarianism, fight corruption, and promote human rights.¹⁵ Pursuing Russia worldwide in the courts for any damages against Ukraine would put teeth into those declarations and use the law against those who abuse it.

AFGHANISTAN REDUX

A Russian invasion of Ukraine—or even a limited incursion into eastern Ukraine—would provide the United States and other Western countries with an opportunity to bog the Russian military down in a protracted insurgency, much like the Soviet Union faced in Afghanistan in the 1980s.¹⁶ The United States and other NATO countries should not—and do not need to—deploy their own military forces to Ukraine, but they should aid Ukrainian resistance efforts.

Russia has ruthlessly targeted insurgents in such campaigns as Chechnya and Syria, and it would do so again in Ukraine. Its methods against a Ukrainian resistance would likely be swift and brutal. Any sanctuary that rebels use, whether in rump Ukrainian or NATO territory, would be subject to Russian attack. Russia would also likely attempt to interdict outside assistance to Ukraine through heavy fortifications and mines.

Nevertheless, there are several factors that will make it difficult for Russia to hold territory in Ukraine. First, there is a burgeoning Ukrainian nationalism that will be difficult, if not impossible, for Russia to extinguish. Second, Ukraine’s borders with NATO countries—including Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania—provide ideal locations to establish safe havens and organize an insurgency. The United States and its Western partners should conduct several steps as part of a sustained campaign:

- **Economic Sanctions:** Implement severe economic and financial sanctions against Russia and potentially Belarus in the event of an invasion or a major escalation in the conflict. Examples include imposing

export controls, such as using the U.S. 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. Such moves would expand the reach of sanctions beyond financial targets. If the crisis escalates, the United States and its partners could impose sanctions on Russian oil and natural gas exports. They could also cut off Russia from SWIFT, the global electronic messaging service that facilitates financial transactions between banks around the world.

- **Military Lend-Lease:** Enact a Lend-Lease Act to provide Ukraine with war materiel at little or no cost. Priority items would include additional anti-tank launchers and missiles (such as Javelins and NLAWs), surface-to-air missiles and systems (such as Stingers and GROMs), and anti-ship missiles (such as Harpoons); electronic warfare and cyber defense systems; unmanned aerial vehicles (such as TB2s); small arms and artillery, including ammunition; vehicle and aircraft spare parts; petroleum, oil, and lubricants; rations; medical support; and other needs of a military involved in sustained combat. This aid could occur through overt means with the help of U.S. and other Western military forces, including special operations, or it could be a covert action authorized by the U.S. president and led by the Central Intelligence Agency.
- **Economic Assistance:** Provide economic support, including energy, to Ukraine and NATO allies due to the expected disruption of Russian gas flows to Europe.
- **Information Operations:** Conduct public diplomacy and media broadcasts to Ukraine and globally, including in Russia, to accurately portray what is happening. Effective and timely information operations are critical to combat Russia's aggressive disinformation and psychological operations.
- **Intelligence:** Provide intelligence to Ukraine regarding Russian strategic planning and military and intelligence activity that would allow Ukraine to plan operations; disrupt Russian lines of communication and supply; warn of airborne, ground, and amphibious attacks; and locate all major Russian units. In addition, rapidly declassifying and publicly disseminating intelligence on Russian activities will continue to be important.
- **War Crimes:** Coordinate with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) to document all war crimes inflicted on

the Ukrainian people and to demand redress once the war is over. In Syria, Russia bombed hospitals, humanitarian aid convoys, and civilian targets that it claimed were aiding rebels.

- **Humanitarian Aid:** Offer humanitarian support to help Ukraine deal with internally displaced persons (IDPs). This assistance may also need to be extended to NATO allies on Ukraine's borders for refugees fleeing westward.

On the humanitarian front, a Russian incursion into Ukraine could cause part of the civilian population to flee and become either IDPs in Ukraine or international refugees. The initial three years of fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk displaced over 2 million Ukrainians from their homes.¹⁷ A partial or a full invasion of Ukraine could create a new flow of IDPs and refugees, which, depending on the extent of the fighting, could involve millions of people that need humanitarian assistance, including shelter, food, and protection.

Such a crisis will require a unified, multinational effort. Within the U.S. government, the U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of State, and Department of Defense have been conducting joint planning on how to deal with a forced displacement crisis in Ukraine. However, the ability to provide humanitarian aid to millions of refugees in Eastern and Central Europe exceeds U.S. capacity. The European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations and leading European donors must take the lead on planning and mobilizing the necessary personnel, equipment, supplies, and finances.¹⁸

Despite this possibility, European governments have been less than proactive in conducting contingency planning.¹⁹ So far, leading European donors and humanitarian actors have not announced contingency plans. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and International Organization for Migration would need to lead any response to widespread displacement, in terms of meeting protection needs and administration processing of those displaced.

The refugee issue also has a political aspect. The cynical “weaponization” of the Syrian refugee crisis by Presidents Assad, Lukashenko, and Putin demonstrated how refugee flows into Europe can be used to create fissures and exacerbate tensions between NATO states and within them. Mishandling of a future Ukrainian refugee crisis will aid Russia in its efforts to undermine NATO by creating resentment in countries near Ukraine's borders, who may believe that they have been left alone to deal with the crisis. This would add fuel to the already heated

debate within Europe over refugees and undermine alliance unity at a critical moment. Consequently, proper prior planning should be initiated immediately to ensure an effective humanitarian response and mitigate against the exploitation of the humanitarian crisis for political and strategic gain.

Additionally, the United States and its allies and partners should coordinate closely with NGOs and the ICC to document all war crimes and demand redress once the war is over. Kyiv is a signatory to the Rome Statute, which gives the ICC jurisdiction to investigate war crimes in Ukraine. One case has already been brought to the ICC by Ukraine for crimes against humanity committed in the context of the “Maidan” protests in Kyiv and other regions of Ukraine between November 21, 2013, and February 22, 2014.²⁰ Russia should be warned that this precedent could be repeated and that justice will be served for Russian violations of these treaties no matter how long it takes.

The U.S. government should also coordinate with NGOs and the ICC to prepare to document all war crimes inflicted on the Ukrainian people and to demand redress once the war is over.

PUTIN’S PROBLEMS

Russian president Vladimir Putin is not a chess grandmaster.²¹ He has boxed himself into a corner in Ukraine and is left with few good moves. Ukraine is a problem for Moscow precisely *because* Ukraine is democratizing, constructing a new national identity, and moving slowly away from Moscow and toward the West. Putin’s military moves are also unifying NATO, whose members have shown more energy and coordination than at any time since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, Ukraine will likely be a source of tension between Russia and the West for the foreseeable future even if the crisis de-escalates.

Russia’s goals continue to 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 allegiances toward the West. The current crisis is likely to accelerate these desires. Consequently, the United States and its Western partners need to conduct a sustained effort that supports Ukraine and raises the financial and military costs for Moscow of a war in Ukraine—either now or in the future. The chess match with Putin is not over. It is only beginning. ■

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