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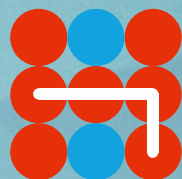
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# Russia's military buildup along Ukraine's border: What to expect?

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Hybrid CoE

**Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis** is a short paper addressing timely questions concerning hybrid threats. It aims to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding, explain processes behind a phenomenon, or highlight trends and future challenges. It is aimed at a wider audience of experts and non-experts alike.

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# Russia's military buildup along Ukraine's border: What to expect?

*Given Russia's force posture along Ukraine's border, the possibility of warfare has to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, Western states should take a more comprehensive view with regard to Russia's toolkit for compellence. Focussing on the military buildup might be exactly what the Kremlin intends – drawing attention to the obvious, while the deployment may not be aimed at intervention as the primary aim, but at confusing and destabilizing.*

## Introduction

Since November 2021, Russia has been pursuing its biggest military buildup in post-Soviet times along Ukraine's border. Against the background of negotiations on issues of Euro-Atlantic security, a show of force may serve as a means of coercive diplomacy in order to gain substantial concessions from Ukraine, NATO and the US. However, a look at the capabilities clearly shows that Moscow is increasingly amassing the necessary force posture to pursue not only limited interventions in Ukraine, but large-scale warfare as well.

## An unprecedented buildup

Russian troops had already been moved near the border with Ukraine in spring 2021. When the exercise ended, some pre-positioned units remained. Since November 2021, personnel and hardware are again being assembled there en masse. Units from all military districts are involved, including from the 1st Guard Tank Army (near Moscow), the 58th Army (North Caucasus) and the 41st Combined Arms Army (Siberia). According to US intelligence and OSINT sources, by early February 2022, Moscow had amassed approximately 100,000 troops within 300 kilometres of the southern and

western border with Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> In addition, approximately 30,000 soldiers are expected to arrive in Belarus as part of a joint exercise scheduled to end on February 20, 2022. A contingent are being redeployed from the Far East (35th Army).<sup>2</sup> Together with modern air defence systems (S-400) and fighter aircraft (SU-35), they will reinforce Russia's force posture towards northern Ukraine. Furthermore, the force at Russia's disposal also includes pro-Russian separatist forces and covertly deployed Russian soldiers in the separatist-controlled part of Donbas (approximately 15,000 fighters). According to American intelligence sources, if Russia were supported by reservists and auxiliary forces, it could duly concentrate a force of about 175,000 men on the border with Ukraine within a few weeks.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian deployment is not only different in size from the spring buildup, it is also being conducted in a much less transparent manner. Materiel and personnel are moved at night, units move between different training grounds, and the official information on training sites in Belarus does not match the actual position of troops. Moreover, the overarching political context has intensified significantly since spring 2021 – both with regard to Russia's relations with Ukraine, and with NATO and the United States.

1 For an overview with regard to Russia's military buildup, see Rochan Consulting, 'Blog', <https://rochan-consulting.com/blog>; Michael Kofman, 'Putin's Wager in Russia's standoff with the West', War on the Rocks, 24 January 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/01/putins-wager-in-Russias-standoff-with-the-West/>. [Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 11 February 2022.]

2 Pavel Polityuk and Sabine Siebold, 'NATO says Russia to have 30,000 troops on drills in Belarus, north of Ukraine', Reuters, 3 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-says-russia-have-30000-troops-drills-belarus-north-ukraine-2022-02-03/>.

3 Shane Harris and Paul Sonne, 'Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, U.S. intelligence warns', Washington Post, 3 December 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecd-f7a2ad\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecd-f7a2ad_story.html).

## The political context: escalating crisis

Russian-Ukrainian relations deteriorated dramatically in 2021. The Kremlin seems to have realized that no diplomatic solution to Russia's advantage can be achieved with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Above all, hopes of gaining influence over Ukraine via a special status for separatist-controlled Donbas along the lines of the Minsk II Agreement faded. Furthermore,<sup>4</sup> Ukraine's deepening defence cooperation with the United States in particular is perceived as a de facto incorporation of Ukraine into the Atlantic Alliance. As a consequence, Russian rhetoric towards Ukraine became more demanding and belligerent. President Vladimir Putin complained that Ukraine was becoming "an antipode to Russia, an anti-Russia" and that Ukraine's "true sovereignty" would be "possible only in partnership with Russia".<sup>5</sup> In parallel, the Kremlin currently sees a window of opportunity to exploit Western weakness: a US administration that looks primarily to China, a new German government, and an upcoming presidential election in France.

Against this background, Moscow specified its previously vague "red lines" in December 2021 when it published two draft treaty proposals with the USA and NATO.<sup>6</sup> Therein, Moscow demands that

- a) NATO will not accept any further members;
- b) the Atlantic Alliance and the US will renounce any military cooperation with Ukraine; and
- c) the military implications of the previous enlargement rounds since 1997 are to be reversed by neither stationing personnel nor hardware in the eastern member states, nor carrying out joint exercises.

De facto, this would mean a complete revision of the existing Euro-Atlantic security order. The post-Soviet states would belong to Russia's zone of

influence, while the eastern NATO members would form a buffer zone. In view of these maximal demands – coupled with time pressure – the Russian troop buildup takes on a more dangerous dimension than in spring 2021.

Since the decision-making process within the Kremlin is opaque, it is impossible to assess Russia's cost-benefit calculation. A possible approach is to take a look at how Russia has used its armed forces as a foreign policy tool so far. According to the previous pattern, one would expect Moscow to use its troop deployment

- a) as a part of coercive diplomacy; or
- b) for limited interventions (in time or function), taking into account both domestic and military risks (e.g. high casualty rates), and economic costs (e.g. sanctions, costs of annexation).

However, by assessing the current troop buildup only through the lens of Russia's previous behaviour, one risks overlooking shifts in the Kremlin's cost-benefit calculation. Therefore, one should not only ask which options seem likely against the background of past experience, but also which ones would be possible in view of the capabilities that Russia has deployed.<sup>7</sup>

## Options in line with previous patterns

### Show of force to underpin negotiations

It would be consistent with the previous logic to see the current troop buildup as a part of coercive diplomacy aimed at persuading the United States and NATO to make substantial concessions with regard to the Euro-Atlantic security order and Ukraine to implement Minsk II. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Moscow has already achieved success in this way. In spring 2021, President Putin managed to get the first meeting with President Joe Biden as a result of the spring manoeuvre. Now, NATO and the US are talking to

<sup>4</sup> 'Острорюжетная внешняя политика' [Action-packed foreign policy], Коммерсантъ, 30 December 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5154624>.

<sup>5</sup> 'Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council', 14 May 2021, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65572](https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65572); see also Vladimir Putin, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 12 July 2021, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>6</sup> 'О российских проектах документов по обеспечению правовых гарантий безопасности со стороны США и НАТО', -Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 17 December 2021, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/ro/nato/1790818/](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/ro/nato/1790818/).

<sup>7</sup> For discussions on possible military options, see Rob Lee, 'Moscow's Compellence Strategy', Foreign Policy Research Institute, 18 January 2022, <https://fpri.org/article/2022/01/moscows-compellence-strategy/>; Frederick W. Kagan et al., 'Putin's Likely Course of Action in Ukraine: Updated Course of Action Assessment', Institute for the Study of War, 27 January 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org>.

Russia about its security concerns and the talks are taking place in formats that raise Moscow's status bilaterally and put it on an equal footing with the US and NATO, while the EU and post-Soviet states are formally being excluded. However, if Moscow's primary aim consists of underpinning the negotiation process, it would have to demonstrate a certain willingness to compromise. But by imposing time pressures on maximal demands, it risks manoeuvring itself into an impasse where military escalation might remain the only face-saving option. Nor can it be ruled out that the failure of the talks was what the Kremlin intended from the outset, and that they only serve to legitimize an intervention that was planned anyway.

### **Permanent military presence in Belarus**

Another scenario seems very likely. After ending the joint exercise with Belarusian armed forces, Moscow might establish a substantial – de facto or formal – military presence there. In doing so, Russia would not only expand its influence over Belarus, but also be able to credibly threaten a military intervention in Ukraine via the northern axis in the longer perspective. Furthermore, by threatening to close the Suwalki Gap from both Kaliningrad and Belarus, thereby cutting the Baltic states off from the rest of NATO, Moscow would severely complicate the Alliance's military-strategic position.

### **Overt invasion in Donbas**

Another option in line with the previous pattern of using military power would entail overtly invading the separatist-controlled part of Donbas. The Russian force posture in spring 2021 and November 2021 – both in size as well as in geographical terms – pointed very much towards such a limited option. Besides, the Kremlin has already set up conditions to legitimize an overt intervention. By now, more than 600,000 residents of Donbas have received Russian passports. According to Russian legislation, armed forces are permitted to intervene

abroad in order to protect fellow citizens. An information campaign portraying Donbas residents as threatened is already underway. Statements by the Ukrainian presidential administration about wanting to retake the separatist areas<sup>8</sup> or possible false flag terrorist attacks in Donbas could provide the pretext.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Communist Party (KPRF) faction in the Duma is preparing a vote to request Putin to recognize the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as independent states.<sup>10</sup> At first sight, such a step makes little sense since Russia controls the territory anyway. However, by intervening overtly in Donbas, Moscow could put President Zelenskiy in a precarious domestic and foreign policy position, whereby he would lose the room for manoeuvre between domestic demands for a military response and warnings from Western capitals not to let the situation escalate further. Furthermore, overtly deploying more soldiers and heavy weapons in Donbas would – together with a permanent military presence in Belarus – enable Russia to increase military pressure on Ukraine in the long-term perspective.

### **Options beyond the previous pattern**

The logic of military force deployment to date argues against intervening beyond Donbas into Ukraine. Moscow would face massive economic, political and, depending on the specific option, military costs in any of the possible options. These scenarios only make sense if Moscow has lost all hope of exerting influence in Ukraine by non-military means, or if the Kremlin calculates that striking now would be less costly than waiting until Kyiv's defence cooperation with Western states has strengthened the military capabilities of the Ukrainian armed forces significantly. In consequence, Moscow would risk losing some of its military options. Besides, it cannot be ruled out that the military situation will escalate by default.

Three factors speak in favour of taking a military intervention into Ukraine beyond Donbas seriously.

<sup>8</sup> 'Kiev eyes retake of Donbass until end of 2020 but drafts plan B', Tass, 7 May 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1153961>.

<sup>9</sup> Shoygu warned on 22 December 2021 that American PMCs would prepare terror attacks in Donbas: 'Расширенное заседание коллегии Минобороны', 22 December 2021, <https://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67402>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Communist party submits draft resolution to State Duma on raising issue of Russia recognizing Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics"', 19 January 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2022/01/19/communist-party-submits-draft-resolution-to-state-duma-on-raising-issue-of-russia-recognizing-donetsk-and-luhansk-people-s-republics>.

1. Activities that would be expected in the run-up to a military operation are already taking place. These include intensified disinformation campaigns as well as cyberattacks.
2. In the past two years, Russia's armed forces have conducted exercises intensively to prepare various operational options, including high-intensity conflict. For example, the latest strategic command-staff exercises took place in the Southern (Kavkaz 2020) and Western (Zapad 2021) Military Districts; additional activities include current readiness checks on Crimea and in the Military District East, as well as the joint exercise in Belarus.
3. The way in which the Russian force posture towards Ukraine has evolved opens up more military options for Moscow, including a large-scale attack. While mainly motorized rifle and artillery units were deployed near the Ukrainian border in November 2021, since the end of December so-called strategic enablers, such as communications and command and control systems, as well as ammunition depots and field hospitals, have also been moved there. Added to this, the time-consuming transportation of personnel and hardware from Siberia and the Far East to the Western border is well advanced; in terms of reinforcements, Moscow can quickly mobilize units that are stationed between 300 and 600 kilometres from the border if necessary.

Given its force posture, Russia could pursue either limited interventions – in terms of both time and function – as well as large-scale warfare. Since the Ukrainian armed forces are significantly inferior to the Russian armed forces when it comes to equipment, weaponry, and readiness, both quantitatively and qualitatively, Moscow could probably count on a military victory in any scenario. The decisive questions are rather what military costs (delay, number of casualties) Moscow is willing to bear, and how it can achieve its political goals.

#### **Establishing a land bridge to Crimea**

A regionally limited military operation would entail establishing a land bridge to Crimea. This would require capturing the Dnieper Channel as well as

the heavily fortified coastal city of Mariupol. Such an option has the advantage of solving a concrete problem, namely the peninsula's water supply. In addition, by controlling the Sea of Azov, Russia could destabilize Ukraine's economy significantly. However, it is questionable as to whether such a limited aggression would be enough to achieve the overarching goal of stopping Ukraine's pro-Western course; on the contrary, it could increase the incentives to anchor Ukraine in Western security partnerships.

#### **Air strikes**

In order to minimize their own casualties, Russian armed forces could massively target Ukrainian military installations and units as well as critical infrastructure. In recent weeks, Russian armed forces have deployed a substantial quantity of artillery, multiple launch rocket systems and short-range missiles. For example, 36 launch pads for Iskander-M short-range cruise missiles are now stationed near the Ukrainian border, supplemented by combat helicopters and aircraft. Given the lack of adequate air force and air defence capabilities, the Ukrainian armed forces would be able to put up little retaliation.

#### **Large-scale ground operation**

Targeted air strikes, however, could also set the stage for a large-scale intervention in Ukraine, including ground troops. In recent weeks, Moscow has expanded its military posture for simultaneous action along various axes: While the military build-up until December was limited primarily to the southern and western border region, the transfer of troops to Yelnya and Pogonovo, as well as to Belarus, underpins the northern attack option in the direction of Kyiv. Indicators that a major operation is imminent would not only involve a further increase in personnel, the deployment of additional airborne units or more readiness checks, but above all the mobilization of forces that would be necessary for an occupation scenario. Cities with millions of inhabitants would have to be conquered, insurgency would have to be eliminated, and a functioning state and government structures loyal to Russia would have to be established. In addition to regular armed forces, such an option would also require

reservists and paramilitary forces of the National Guard, the Ministry of Civil Emergencies or the FSB border guards.

### **Or is it all about destabilization? Hybrid threats with regard to Russia's troop buildup**

Given Russia's force posture along Ukraine's border, the possibility of warfare has to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, Western states should take a more comprehensive view with regard to Russia's toolkit for compellence. Focussing on the military buildup might be exactly what the Kremlin intends – drawing attention to the obvious, while the deployment may not be aimed at intervention primarily, but at confusing and destabilizing. The current troop buildup may be part of a longer strategic endeavour in line with Russian debates on “grey zone warfare” and “hybrid warfare”.<sup>11</sup>

Here, military means are part of a broader toolkit combining military and non-military methods of influence. Military threats are meant to deceive, deflect and destabilize a target country, and therefore form an important part of so-called “mental warfare”.<sup>12</sup> In essence, it is about shifting the reference points in public and political debates in order to either prepare the battlefield to one's advantage prior to military intervention, or to avoid warfare by reaching political goals without having to wield military power in a significant way. Along

these lines, fuelling the fear of military escalation can be understood as a means of

- a) putting Ukraine's leadership and society under pressure and keeping it occupied with reacting to Russian threats, instead of focussing on necessary reforms, and thereby destabilizing the previous reform process; and
- b) driving wedges into NATO and member-state societies by escalating polarized disputes about appropriate (re)actions.

According to Russian military scientist Alexander Bartosh, the essence of “grey zone warfare” is “not in achieving individual operational-tactical objectives, but in forming a growing avalanche of relatively small-scale events that together serve as a catalyst for the formation of an entirely new strategic reality”.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the Kremlin might find it useful to escalate and de-escalate military tensions on its Western borders as a long-term option to weaken NATO and to create Ukraine fatigue in Western capitals, thereby undermining the prospects for Ukraine's pro-Western course. In addition, hybrid threats will be an integral part of any military option that Russia might pursue. Creating a pro-Russian political alternative by bribery and subversion, as well as driving wedges into Ukraine's society through disinformation and high casualty rates will probably be part of any scenario.

11 See A. A. Bartosh, 'Gray Zones as Key Elements of the Current Operational Space in Hybrid Warfare (Part I)', *Military Thought*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2021): 1-16; A. V. Serzhantov, 'Transformation of the Concept of War: From Past to Present', *Military Thought*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2021): 55-68.

12 A. V. Serzhantov, 'Transformation of the Concept of War'.

13 A. A. Bartosh, 'Gray Zones as Key Elements of the Current Operational Space in Hybrid Warfare (Part II)', *Military Thought*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2021): 17-32.

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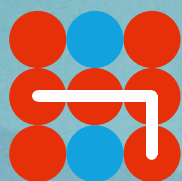
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