

27 January 2022

## Russia / Ukraine What Next?



**Sir Tony Brenton** joined the British Diplomatic Service in 1975 and, in the course of a 33 year career, served in the Arab world, the European Union, Russia and the USA. He has dealt with such issues as the Arab/Israel dispute, global climate change, international energy policy, and the Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq wars. He was a senior official at the British Embassy in Washington DC following 9/11 and at the time of the Iraq war. He served as British Ambassador in Moscow 2004-2008 during the most difficult period in modern British/Russian relations. He was also a Senior Advisor to Lloyds of London and Director of the Russia British Chamber of Commerce. He has written a well received book on international environmental diplomacy – “The Greening of Machiavelli” and also authored “Historically Inevitable? Turning Points of the Russian Revolution”. He is a regular commentator in the “Times” and other British publications, and a Fellow of Wolfson College Cambridge where he is writing a book on Russia at the time of Peter the Great.

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### Background: Russia and the West

The current confrontation between the West and Russia has deep roots. Since the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union, amid much talk of Russia merging into a “Common European Home” and a shared and peaceful Europe extending from “Vancouver to Vladivostok”, things have gone fast downhill. Russia believes it has seen a malign West encouraging domestic opposition movements (notably in Chechnya), backing public demonstrations on the streets of Moscow and elsewhere (Hillary Clinton as US Secretary of State publicly supported the particularly threatening demonstrations of 2011/12), and, most recently, bolstering Putin’s key political bugbear, Alexei Navalny. Anti-Russian “colour revolutions” in former Soviet republics have regularly enjoyed overt Western support, as did the Georgian attack on Russian troops which precipitated the 2008 war. And the West has of course played a central role in overthrowing a succession of regimes friendly to Russia – Serbia, Iraq, Libya. Meanwhile for its part the West has been appalled by Russia’s sharp authoritarian turn, its bullying and general political skulduggery in much of the former communist bloc, its military intervention to save the unspeakable Assad regime in Syria, as well as its cyberaggressions, overseas murders, and readiness to interfere in Western political processes, notably the 2016 US Presidential election.

### The Key Issues: NATO Expansion

The present crisis has placed in stark relief two issues lying at the core of the wider antagonism – NATO expansion and Ukraine. On the first of these a shrunken Russia has since 1991 watched with growing discomfort as its previous Cold War adversary, NATO, has taken in 14 new members,

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expanded its population base to close to a billion people, and moved its front line 700km closer to Moscow. The Russians moreover believe (with some justification) that they were given assurances either that NATO would not expand or that it would do so in a much more controlled manner (indeed it has been suggested that it was the perceived breach of these assurances that turned the entire Russian security establishment against the West). For its part, the West has argued that NATO expansion has contributed to European stability (true, apart from the total alienation of Russia it has caused), that it is not directed at Russia (true in that NATO has no offensive intentions; but, of course in the minds of securocrats capabilities trump intentions) and that nations should be free to join whatever alliance they choose. In practice the US has felt free to toss Russia the occasional political sop (such as the toothless NATO/Russia Council, and a heavily hedged 1997 commitment not to base nuclear weapons or “substantial permanent forces” in new NATO members) while pressing ahead with expansion however vigorously Russia might object. Toria Nuland, now No.3 official in the State Department, once famously observed in this context that the Russians should be made to “eat their spinach”.

### The Key Issues: Ukraine

Then there is Ukraine. There is a well-established history of deeply neuralgic relations between ex-imperial powers and the closest of their former subjects – Britain/Ireland, France/Algeria. Thus too with Russia/Ukraine. Ukraine is the often fractious union of a mostly Ukrainian speaking Western half whose historical and other links look firmly West, and a mostly Russian speaking Eastern half where the pull of Russia has been predominant. The Russians have long (and rather condescendingly) thought of the country as their loyal Slavic “little brother”. Ukraine nevertheless played a leading role in the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, and has since gradually edged its way out of Russia’s shadow. In 1994 it surrendered its post-Soviet nuclear stockpile in exchange for Russian guarantees of its territorial integrity (broken, of course, in 2014); 1997 saw a shaky agreement to allow Russia for a while to keep its Black Sea Fleet in the, then Ukrainian, port of Sevastopol; but the arrangement was plainly very temporary. The period saw recurrent popular political claims in Russia that the Crimea (formally transferred to Ukraine only in 1954) was “really” Russian. In Ukraine’s so called “Orange Revolution” of 2004 massive demonstrations forced the pro-Russian presidential candidate to give way to his pro-Western opponent (described by Putin at the time as his “worst political defeat”), and led to five years of rapid Ukrainian convergence with both NATO and the EU. There were “gas wars” in 2005 and 2009 where Ukraine cut off Russian gas deliveries to its customers in Western Europe. And, finally, in Ukraine’s “Maidan Revolution” of 2014 massive pro-Western demonstrations in Kiev and elsewhere (with unhelpfully visible US involvement) sent another pro-Russian Ukrainian President packing, provoking Russia to annex Crimea (in the first forcible seizure of territory in Europe since 1945) and back a separatist revolt in the far east of Ukraine, the Donbass, which, despite peace efforts, continues to this day. The Russians have dug in on absolutely inflexible opposition to Ukrainian membership of NATO (which, as they point out, would add over 1,200 miles to the direct NATO/Russia land border) and support for the Donbass separatists. Meanwhile the West has imposed extensive (but, at least in their policy impact, ineffective) economic sanctions on Russia, and started supplying Ukraine with defensive weaponry and other military support.

Thus matters have stood for the past seven years. Over that period Putin's views on Ukraine have visibly hardened, culminating in a long and very personal essay published in July 2021. This extols the supposed ethnic, linguistic, religious and political unity of Ukraine with Russia over much of history and laments the current split which Putin puts down to, on the one hand, Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis, and, on the other, to Western interference intended to drive Ukraine and Russia apart. Unsurprisingly this has been widely interpreted as a manifesto for Russian reabsorption of Ukraine. It is an important question, to which we do not know the answer, whether Putin sees such reabsorption as a real political objective or a nostalgic vision (there is a similar question about Putin's much touted determination to, in the words of a recent NATO Secretary General, "rebuild the Russian Empire").

### Today's Crisis

Putin's essay, probably not by coincidence, appeared in the middle of a year (2021) when the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine intensified sharply. By the start of the year it had become very clear that the "Minsk process" to resolve the Donbass war was going nowhere. This reinforced fears in Moscow of a renewed Ukrainian military push in the Donbass or on Crimea; fears which have played an important background role in what has followed. Meanwhile a new US Administration, led by a man known to detest Putin and whose campaign had advertised a tough approach to Russia, took office in January. That same month saw Ukrainian troops and heavy weapons moved in the direction of the Donbass. In response, but also as a clear signal to Biden of how seriously Russia takes the Ukraine issue, there was an 80,000 man build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's border. Biden (who does not want confrontation with Russia to get in the way of his principal foreign policy priority – China) set up a summit with Putin. This took place, unexpectedly successfully, in Geneva in June setting up a "strategic security dialogue". Meanwhile, as icing on Putin's cake but probably more intended to placate the Germans, Biden waived US sanctions on Russia's newly constructed Nord-Stream 2 gas pipeline intended to expand gas exports to Germany (or at least offer a route for them that avoids Ukraine).

The brief period of relaxation that followed was upset by three things; various domestic Ukrainian measures chipping away at the status and linguistic rights of their Russian speaking population, a new law making any settlement in the Donbass even harder to achieve, and the first deployment by Ukraine of attack drones in the Donbass (almost as if Ukraine, following the example of Georgia in 2008, was deliberately enraging the Bear in order to engage US support; certainly that was the Russian view). On top of all this NATO at this time conducted its first ever major naval exercises in the Black Sea. The result, beginning in November, was a second Russian military build-up on Ukraine's borders much larger and more menacing than the first, amounting at the latest estimate to some 127,000 troops. Putin in two very hardline speeches, while denying any intention to invade, said that Ukrainian membership of NATO was a "Red Line" for Russia. He demanded legally binding guarantees from the West that NATO would expand no further east and that there would be no deployment of offensive Western weapons into NATO's post-1996 members. These demands were quickly incorporated into draft treaties handed to the US with a further demand for a swift written reply.

Biden responded with four points, both publicly and in two conversations with Putin: Russia's demands were unacceptable; any Russian military action against Ukraine would be followed by sanctions "like you've never seen them before"; the US itself would not get involved in military action in Ukraine, but would certainly supply any equipment Ukraine needed; and, finally, the US was willing to talk. The Russians immediately took that offer up.

The first round of talks took place in the week beginning 10 January both with the US (which, the Russian chief negotiator made clear, was the only format that Russia took seriously) and with the US accompanied by various constellations of Europeans. There was little progress. The Russians reiterated their position. The West suggested arms control talks for the NATO area but sat firmly on the position that further expansion of NATO was a decision for NATO and potential applicants, not Russia. The Russian response to this rebuff was to raise the temperature further. January 14<sup>th</sup> saw a massive, almost certainly Russian, cyberattack on Ukrainian official websites. The Pentagon reported planned Russian "false flag" operations in Ukraine. The Russian military build-up continued with units brought in very visibly from Siberia for a joint exercise with Belarus right on Ukraine's border. Biden midweek acknowledged the likelihood of an attack and reminded Putin of the "devastating" sanctions that would follow.

Nevertheless a further round of talks – this time between US Secretary of State Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was set for 21 January in Geneva. The outcome of this meeting (which is where the process currently stands) can be read in two ways. On the one hand there was again no visible shift in the positions of the two sides, and since then NATO has moved to reinforce its more vulnerable member states against the possibility of Russian military action against them. On the other hand, however, diplomacy will continue. The US will supply a written response this week to the Russian demands. And the two sides acknowledged the possibility of a further Putin/Biden meeting if that would help achieve a peaceful outcome.

Outside the council chamber two other developments are worth noting. Firstly, the precautionary (and quite small) military build-up in some vulnerable NATO states has attracted a lot of angry attention in Russia. And indeed whether or not the Russians attack Ukraine (which they continue to deny) they certainly don't intend to go to war with NATO. Nevertheless the dangers of tit for tat escalation, or simple accident, are very clear. Secondly on the NATO side something of a gap has opened up between the UK and US on the one hand and the other major European powers on the other. The UK/US have taken a very hawkish line, playing up the likelihood of a Russian assault, supplying arms, running down their Embassies in Kiev and headlining any evidence of Russian perfidy (such as the ill sourced, internally contradictory and frankly implausible stories put out by UK and US intelligence of a Russian plotted coup against Zelensky). The other major Europeans, while absolutely in agreement on the need for a very tough reaction (sanctions etc) if the Russians do invade, have been much less ready to raise the temperature beforehand, have a more limited package of sanctions in mind than the US is pressing for (Germany has not yet even abandoned the possibility of Nord-Stream 2 going ahead), and seem altogether less persuaded that this crisis will actually turn military.

## What Next?

Where all this goes depends crucially on what Russia intends – which boils down largely to what Putin intends (he pays close attention to Ukraine related business and has on occasion visibly overruled various of his ministers, including Lavrov, in this area of policy). Putin is the poker faced tactician par excellence. In the present crisis no outsider really knows his thinking. Indeed it may be (as some sensible commentators have suggested) that he hasn't yet made up his own mind. Nevertheless it is possible to put together some of the key factors which will weigh with him:

- He plainly regards an anti-Russian, “Western puppet”, Ukraine as an historical outrage, and the prospect of such a Ukraine joining NATO as both a real security threat and (perhaps more important) an act of treachery to the “Slavic Brotherhood” of history.

- This does not mean he is intent on Russia reabsorbing Ukraine. Putin is a cautious realist, very conscious of the potential cost of overreaching in foreign policy (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan played a large role in the collapse of the Soviet Union). His boldest foreign policy moves (Crimea, Syria) have involved carefully calculated and contained risks. He knows that the Russian public has a very limited appetite for extended war and substantial casualties.

- It is likely therefore that his aim is more limited – along the lines of the demands that Russia has put to the West. Putin will recognise that the demands as stated are unachievable – the West will never sign a treaty excluding forever any expansion of NATO – but some sort of bankable assurance to that effect, or at least to further expansion (particularly any including Ukraine) being a long time in the future, would enable him to claim that the current, so called, “heavy metal diplomacy” - cyberattacks, military exercises and so on - had produced worthwhile results.

- If however he cannot get such assurances, or is genuinely determined to get more than the West can offer, then he faces a real dilemma. To come away with no worthwhile result would be a humiliation not only internationally but (perhaps more important) with the tough nationalist securocrats that surround him. He would certainly lose standing and, conceivably, his job.

- In those circumstances the temptation to engage in some limited military action in Ukraine would be strong. It would be a clear demonstration that Russia is not to be ignored. The US statement that they would not be drawn in militarily gives strong assurance against a wider conflagration. The threat of “devastating” sanctions can be set against the ineffectiveness of Western sanctions so far, the “Fortress Russia” preparations already made to resist new Western economic pressures, and the evident disagreements within the West on what sanctions actually to deploy. There is also the thought that Russia's burgeoning relationship with China is likely to offer some buffer against the impact of Western hostility.

- As to what that action might be (and here I am way outside my area of expertise) most sensible military commentators (including in Ukraine) seem to be of the view that the Russian build-up, at least at its present level, is very unlikely to give them enough force to conquer all of what is after all Europe's second largest country. These assessments will feed into Putin's natural caution and suggest that he would go for something much more limited. A natural, and probably manageable, aim would be to reinforce, and perhaps expand, the separatist hold in the Donbass, and maybe link it to Russian held Crimea. Possible straws in the wind are continuing Russian public emphasis

on the supposed Ukrainian military threat to the separatists, and a draft law (currently on hold) in the Russian Duma for the annexation of the Donbass. There is however the question of whether such a limited military gain would be worth the inevitable deluge of Western countermeasures, and in particular the strengthened Western support for Ukraine, that would result.

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