

# Putin's Smith & Wesson: Three Scenarios for a Potential Russian Military Escalation in Ukraine

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The nearly eight-year Russian aggression against Ukraine has entered a new phase. Russia is amassing troops in unprecedented numbers along Ukraine's borders, including with Belarus, and in illegally annexed Crimea. The Kremlin is making a priori unacceptable demands for US, NATO and Ukrainian concessions. The West, led by the US, has rejected Russia's core demands but engaged in a diplomatic process to explore whether something else could be agreed. As talks thus far have failed to produce any substantive progress, fears are increasing that Russia will escalate militarily.

*"A well-known person once said, 'You can get much farther with a kind word and a Smith & Wesson than you can with just a kind word.'" President Vladimir Putin, 2015*

The three scenarios for a potential Russian armed escalation vis-à-vis Ukraine set out below aim to present some rough ideas of what Russian armed actions might be expected. They do not exclude measures elsewhere, such as changes to military posture or doctrine in Russia or a more permanent increase in the Russian military presence in Belarus.

The Kremlin's ultimate goals are political. It would prefer to achieve them without resorting to the use of more military means than is already the case today. However, recent history has shown that Russia is ready to use military force to achieve political goals when the expected benefits of doing so are assessed as higher than the costs. Military violence is a means to an end but does not constitute an end in itself.

## Three potential scenarios for Russian military escalation in Ukraine

### ➤ Increased Russian activity in the non-government-controlled parts of Donbas

Russia could decide to increase its presence in the already occupied parts of Ukraine. The hired “separatists” in Donbas could be supported with regular Russian troops. This was done covertly in 2014 and 2015, in Ilovaisk and Debaltseve respectively, to force Kyiv to sign the Minsk agreements. This time, regular Russian troops in Ukraine might be presented as “peacekeepers” under a Russian or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) flag.

Moscow may also establish more open and direct political relations with the “people’s republics”, or even officially recognize them. The precedent for the latter would be the Kremlin’s treatment of Georgia’s “breakaway regions” in 2008. Ultimately, Russia might even annex the eastern Donbas, as it did Crimea in 2014.

Such measures would consolidate these regions as permanently outside of Kyiv’s control and facilitate Moscow’s management of them. As in the cases of Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region and Crimea, these measures would probably not lead to serious Western sanctions.

On their own, such measures would, however, be counterproductive from a Russian point of view, since Moscow would no longer be able to use the “people’s republics” and the Minsk agreements as levers to “federalize” Ukraine and gain political control over Kyiv. They might also lead to increased Western support for Kyiv, including military aid. NATO’s force posture in its eastern member states might also be reinforced.

### ➤ Destruction of Ukrainian military and other assets

Without inserting ground forces into currently Kyiv-controlled territory, Russia could use missiles, airpower and artillery to destroy select Ukrainian military and other strategic assets. In addition, or alternatively, limited ground forces could be used for raid-like ad hoc attacks. Limited ground operations could be carried out by Russian regular forces, possibly posing as “peacemakers,” or by reinforced irregular “separatist” forces – or both.

The aims of such attacks would be to reduce Ukraine’s military capabilities, damage morale, create dissension on how to respond, scare away foreign and domestic investors, and cause socio-economic decline in order either to intimidate the Ukrainian leadership to succumb to Moscow, or to replace it. Given the West’s track record, Moscow might expect that fear of further escalation would lead to renewed international calls for the appeasement of Russia.

Without a ground attack, however, even highly destructive attacks might be insufficient on their own to lead Kyiv and the West to make significant concessions. New Western sanctions on Russia would be likely. Additional Western support to Ukraine would partly compensate for the destruction.

### ➤ Establishing control of additional Ukrainian territory

Finally, Russia might do what the massive build-up is meant to suggest to Ukraine and others. A large-scale invasion would aim to seize large swaths of the territory currently controlled by Kyiv. Areas close to Russia and Belarus, and Russia-controlled Ukrainian territory would be most threatened. Moscow might try to: (a) seize territories to link the Donbas and/or Transnistria to Crimea; (b) split Ukrainian government-controlled areas from each other; and/or (c) encircle and put pressure on key cities. For instance, Odesa might be surrounded or captured through a landing operation from the Black Sea. Old imperial concepts such as Novorossiia (New Russia), which encompasses Ukraine's eastern and southern territories, and was promoted by Putin in 2014, could come to the fore once again.

Any Russian attempts at further land grabs would be likely to start a fully blown war. This could mean tens of thousands of dead or wounded Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, and perhaps millions of displaced persons. Ukraine's currency, military capabilities and civilian facilities would suffer greatly. The country's socio-economic development would suffer lasting damage. Massive capital flight, business failure and population movement could result in state failure. The Ukrainian leadership would come under pressure to make concessions to Moscow, possibly also from international partners fearful of further escalation.

If successful, Russia could gain control of assets and territories valuable in themselves and useful for the consolidation of previous landgrabs. It would increase Russian power projection in the entire Black Sea region. Kyiv's access to sea trading routes could be blocked. Key Ukrainian industrial and trading cities, such as Mariupol and Odesa, could fall under Russian control.

While these and other potential gains would be high, a larger land operation would also imply huge unpredictability and costs for Russia. Ukrainian regular and partisan resistance could lead to significant numbers of Russian military casualties. Maintaining control of captured territory would pose considerable logistical challenges. Western sanctions would be heavy and cause economic dislocations in Russia, possibly leading to social turmoil. Western military support to Ukraine would increase further, perhaps including supply of offensive weapons.

## **Of Salami and Bayonets**

Russian military action may not play out neatly along the lines of these three scenarios. Elements might be combined or follow on from each other. Initiation of a significant armed escalation will require a casus belli; that is, the fabrication, manipulation or exaggeration of some Ukrainian or Western action to justify a Russian attack. The possibilities are too numerous to enumerate, but a false flag operation could follow the lines of alleged Ukrainian attacks in Crimea in February 2014, which were almost certainly staged by Russia's special services. In general, Russian military action will be characterized by surprise, "maskirovka" or deception, deniability and high speed. Russia will try to retain the initiative, maintain momentum and, to the extent possible, leave different options open.

Each of the above scenarios, or a mix of them, would be backed up with additional threats, brinkmanship and various hybrid measures, such as cyberattacks, economic tools (e.g. cutting energy supplies), and propaganda and disinformation. The Kremlin would be likely to try to weaken or replace the current Ukrainian leadership through subversive operations, “reflexive control” measures and the fanning of political turmoil in Kyiv and elsewhere.

Other states in the West and elsewhere could also become targets of “active measures” designed to create additional worries, cause confusion and raise fears of further escalation. These actions would aim to reduce the appetite for sanctions and other countermeasures, divert attention, tie up resources, advance Russian interests elsewhere and sow discord. The Kremlin would also increase its attempts to create divisions between and within Ukraine’s partners, notably the US, NATO and the EU.

Russia’s international allies and partners, especially kindred or Moscow-dependent regimes such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and other CSTO member states, could also play a role, as might China. These states could be asked, or expected, by the Kremlin to provide rhetorical, political or other support for Moscow’s actions, or at least not oppose them. Within Russia, political propaganda and repression would increase.

As Russia’s actions are driven by wider political goals, coercive diplomacy including renewed Russian offers or demands for negotiations and concessions will accompany a military campaign. Demands could include implementation of the 2014–15 Minsk agreements according to Moscow’s interpretation. In this scenario, the Russian aim would not be to annex eastern Ukraine. Rather, the Kremlin would try to reinsert the occupied Donbas territories into the Ukrainian state while keeping them under its de facto control.

This would give Russia a veto over Ukraine’s future. If Ukraine were to be substantially weakened, Russia might demand further concessions, for example within a “Minsk III” deal. Alternatively, or in addition, Russia could return to demands for concessions from the US or NATO along the lines of the publicly announced draft treaties and agreements of December 2021.

Much, therefore, could happen below the threshold of Russian tanks rolling into Kyiv-controlled territory. Russia might use salami tactics to try to limit costs and risks, and to complicate Western decision making on sanctions and other countermeasures. Such testing of the ground would follow Lenin’s alleged maxim: “You probe with bayonets. If you find mush, you push. If you find steel, you withdraw.”

At the same time, a large-scale Russian shock-and-awe offensive combined with threats of further escalation cannot be entirely ruled out. In this scenario, the Kremlin would try to quickly establish facts on the ground and change the calculi of all of its opponents, in order to rapidly gain bargaining power in negotiations. At some point in the escalation ladder, Russia might even bring its nuclear capabilities into play. No matter which course of action the Kremlin eventually chooses, it will face substantial risks, some of which might appear prohibitive to Western observers. However, the Russian leadership might assess these risks differently – and the possible rewards as high.



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