

Russian Escalation Against Ukraine and the West: A Clear and Imminent Danger That Requires a Firm and Clear Western Response That Upholds the European Security Order

SCEEUS Commentary

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Scene Setter

Periodically since at least 2007, the Kremlin has been progressively turning up the volume on its communications when it feels that it is not being “heard” or “respected” by the West, which in Moscow’s perception means the US. Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine started in 2014, the volume has now reached unprecedented levels and many factors are now coming together in an ominous way. The political analyses and deliberations of the West on how to understand and react to Russia’s war scare against Ukraine are confused partly as to the nature of the threat and partly because they mix means and goals. This commentary seeks to address some of this confusion and to put the significance and relevance of Russian escalation against Ukraine in a wider political context.

Judging by Russia’s political signalling, including, but certainly not limited to its major military buildup along Ukraine’s borders and inside Ukraine’s internationally recognized borders, we are facing a dangerous situation. The danger consists of the obvious and recognized risk of a significantly increased military escalation, which is a means. Less understood and recognized is the risk in terms of the Kremlin’s goal, which is for the West to accept President Putin’s so-called red lines. This would amount to an undermining of the existing European and global rules-based security order, which is based on international law and the European security order as set out in the principles of Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter and other OSCE principles and commitments. This would not resolve the situation but create new problems and risks. The war scare is a means to achieve the latter.

The Kremlin uses reflexive control to frame Western political perceptions and deliberations in such a way that the West responds in the ways most advantageous to Russia. It wants the West to accommodate Russian interests and put pressure on Kyiv to make further concessions on its sovereignty, territorial integrity and right to defend itself according to the UN Charter, and on its right choose its own security arrangements.

Russia’s increasing internal repression and external aggression must be seen as a totality and not as separate. As Russian soft power tools have failed to work, the Kremlin has turned over time to more repressive and antagonistic means.

A brief overview is provided below of ominous signs, Russia’s goals and intentions, its capabilities and means and the opportunities it might perceive as conducive to more successful, antagonistic and aggressive courses of action in the near future. Some recommendations are also made to Western governments on how best to address the situation and not fall into Russian cognitive traps.

Signs and Factors

- Russia's systematic military build-up increasingly looks like the real thing, in contrast to the situation in the spring of 2021.
- Political and diplomatic signalling such as Putin's and Dmitry Medvedev's articles on Ukraine and Putin's comments at Valdai, as well as Putin's recent speech to the Russian Foreign Ministry Board and the shrill tone of the Russian media and commentariat.
- The Kremlin's move away from diplomatic engagement on several fronts, as observed throughout the year the Normandie format, the EU, NATO and bilaterally with Ukraine.
- The instrumentalization of gas deliveries to Europe and gas transit through Ukraine, increasing energy prices in Europe and the certification process of Nord Stream 2.
- Increased domestic repression (e.g. of Memorial and Aleksei Navalny).

Russian Intentions and Goals

The use or threat of use of military violence is not a goal, but a means.

Putin's goals are neither unclear nor mysterious, they have been clearly stated. The methods and timetable that he is prepared to use to achieve them, however, keep everyone guessing. Keeping the West speculating is an end, creating opportunities to divide the EU and NATO. Moscow sees unpredictability and lack of transparency as strategic assets. Furthermore, the Kremlin's political imagination is more far-reaching and the thresholds of its inhibitions much lower than the West's.

Putin has two clearly stated red lines: no "interference in internal affairs" and no challenge to Russia's interests in its near neighbourhood in general and Ukraine in particular. Implicit or explicit acceptance of these red lines would achieve effectively a third goal: a new security order, which is a long-standing Russian objective, be it *de facto* or *de jure* in the form of a new "security treaty", "security pact" or "legally binding guarantees".

Russia wants to establish a sphere of influence along its Western borders, with states with restricted sovereignty over which Moscow can exercise political control. Putin is considering renewed escalation because the war in Donbas, which has led to more than 14 000 deaths in almost eight years, and the Normandie format has not delivered the desired results – a subservient Ukrainian political leadership and society that have turned away from their European and Transatlantic ambitions.

The Kremlin would be happy to return to a cold war paradigm of "peaceful coexistence", which was peaceful only in the sense that it avoided a nuclear war, and focus on the "strategic stability", that it wants to achieve in its relationship with Washington. This would amount to acceptance of spheres of influence – a clear dividing line between East and West, with a Russian-controlled *cordon sanitaire* and buffer states and take democracy, human rights and the rule of law off the agenda. This is about both domestic objectives (regime survival) and external objectives (Russian spheres of influence and the status of a global great power).

Russian ambitions and goals have become more aggressive and ambitious in the past nine months, which incidentally coincides with a new US administration. Its positions are being moved forward, as growing resources are being allocated to its force structures. It is no longer just about a Russian veto on Ukraine moving closer to the EU and NATO. Russia does not want Ukraine to be able to defend itself.

Russian Capabilities and Means

Military threats, intimidation, hybrid threats and other forms of strategic signalling are being used to show that the Kremlin is prepared to escalate to a level at which the West feels it need to accommodate Russian interests – “to escalate to de-escalate”.

Moscow has shown that it is prepared to use all means including military force, the gun has been put on the table. Renewed military aggression against Ukraine would be the last resort. The Kremlin of course wants to achieve its goals without having to use force, hoping that the threat of war will do the job. For the threat to be credible, however, Moscow must signal that it is willing and able to use military force – and there is every reason to believe that it is.

It should be assumed that Moscow is entertaining a range of options and scenarios, and that no final decisions have been made. Moscow is now monitoring the reactions from inside Ukraine and from the West closely and will act accordingly.

Perceived Opportunities for Russia

The Kremlin perceives that it is losing ground in Ukraine. Military support from the US, UK and others have helped Ukraine to enhance its defence capabilities through its own efforts. Russia needs to act now to prevent an irreversible negative outcome in Ukraine. It has unfinished business that needs to be attended to before it is too late, or because it would be less costly now than in the future.

Putin may have made an assessment that renewed military force is a price worth paying to settle the situation once for all and secure a clear and predictable order for Russia with more beneficial rules of the game – a new cold war-type situation.

The West is perceived as divided and in decline, unable or unwilling to counter further Russian aggression. Moscow considers the US administration to be weak, focused on domestic politics and China, and with seemingly little appetite for confrontation with Russia, expressed as “a stable and predictable relationship” and with focus on “strategic stability”. The EU is not taken seriously, not least in light of its dependence on gas deliveries. The change of government in Germany, the upcoming elections in France and Brexit are all factors that, according to Russian analysis, leave Europe weak and divided. Moscow is likely to believe that it is much more capable at brinkmanship.

There also seems to be a Russian belief that Ukraine is unstable and can be nudged. The current goal seems to be to oust Zelensky rather than make him more acquiescent.

Putin might initially have believed that he partly achieved his goal in Geneva of gaining some degree of adherence to his red lines, but he now fears that this may not be the case. He now wants a new summit to advance Russian positions and have them at least tacitly confirmed by Washington.

Russia wants Western political deliberations to focus on the need to accommodate Russian interests and avoid escalation, and on putting more pressure on Ukraine to make concessions, on the assumption that the West needs to accept Russian facts on the ground and to cooperate with Russia on a number of issues. The West is looking for “off-ramps”, which Putin has no intention of using as he is going full speed ahead on to the highway. Moscow is trying through reflexive control to formulate both the problem and the parameters of a possible solution. Albeit unwittingly, some of the recent policy analysis on both sides of the Atlantic has moved according to Russia’s desired analytical framework.

What to Do?

Strategic communications, both overt and covert, are now ongoing. The lack of signalling from parts of the West is in itself a significant signal. Moscow is now carefully monitoring and assessing the responses (or lack of responses) from the West. There is a clear risk of misinterpretations by both sides with Russia overplaying its hand and the West underestimating the seriousness and danger of the situation.

Accountability: Responses need to be clear and united, upholding the Transatlantic link and signal that renewed incursions will incur a significant cost for Moscow for, without necessarily defining the exact price. Russia must be held accountable for its violations of international law and the European security order.

The West needs to stick to the OSCE *comprehensive concept of security*. There should be no decoupling of democracy, human rights and rule of law from “strategic stability issues”. The European and global rules-based orders are about strategic, sustainable stability, in the real meanings of the words.

The purported choice between war and appeasement is a false one. The West is stronger and has a whole array of tools for holding Russia accountable. It needs to show that it is willing and able to use these tools. Attempting to accommodate Russian goals in a futile attempt to de-escalate the situation will come at the cost of undermining the European security order – a lose-lose outcome.

There needs to be reinvigorated *support for and solidarity with Ukraine*, also to help Kyiv avoid falling into Russian traps and providing Russia with a casus belli. It is not altruism to ensure that Ukraine is able to defend itself, which it is fully entitled to do according to the UN Charter, it is the opposite. A Ukraine that is unable to defend itself risks further military escalation and instability. A strong Western response substantially reduces the risk of a major Russian military operation.

A new de facto security order on Russian terms, that is a Russian veto on NATO or EU membership and disregard for international obligations on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, will have consequences beyond Ukraine’s borders, including for countries such as Sweden and Finland. Giving in to Russian demands, and thus condoning Russian violations, would risk US credibility as willing and able to counter attacks on international law and the rules-based security order, including in East Asia. It will make the world even less secure and even more unstable.

There is much at stake. The responsibility lies with Moscow but Russia’s future actions will be informed by Western responses and reactions. Not to act would be irresponsible and have far-reaching negative consequences for European security and the European security order.