

The Russia Crisis: where are we?

Fredrik Löjdquist
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In short: The various elements of the currently escalating European security crisis, caused by Russia, are not new but are now coming together at a critical focal point. We are facing the worst crisis for European security since the end of the cold war. The crisis is systemic: Russia's violations of international law and the European security order based on the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter and its attempt to renegotiate and replace the existing rules-based order.

The threat of renewed Russian military aggression against Ukraine is a key aspect of this, but there are other structural elements of the crisis, and we are faced with complex and multiple challenges. Russia is increasingly aggressively trying to achieve a systemic, tectonic shift in the European and Transatlantic security system to its own advantage. This is playing out in at least three domains: Ukraine, the military power balance in Europe and the overall European security order.

This is not a "Ukraine crisis"; it is not even primarily a Russia-US or Russia-NATO conflict – it is a conflict between Russia and the European security order that affects all the countries of Europe and the wider Transatlantic community. Russia has the initiative, and the West has so far only reacted to Russian actions.

It is not only about Ukraine

Recent diplomatic and political exchanges have not led to a de-escalation on Russia's side – neither militarily nor in its political posturing. Intensive strategic signalling continues.

Moscow is now evaluating its options and waiting for a written answer from Washington – and possibly NATO – as well as the outcome of a planned meeting in the Normandy

Four format this week. Another Biden-Putin summit, which was suggested as a possibility in Geneva talks last Friday, would further help to define Russia's equal status with the US.

We are in a dynamic situation in which Russia's next steps will at least partly be informed by Western responses and strategic signalling. While waiting, Moscow continues its military build-up and posturing, widening its options with i.a. an increased military presence in Belarus.

A renewed Russian military attack on Ukraine might not occur before the Winter Olympics, or at least its opening ceremony on 4 February, which Putin is scheduled to attend and where he will meet Xi Jinping. The perception that a diplomatic track is continuing might serve the Kremlin's interests by slowing Western coordination on support to Ukraine and on sanctions.

The Russian demands and other aims, none of which are new in themselves, are now coming together in a focal point, but not yet a culmination point. On Russia's goals, and its intentions, capabilities and opportunities, [see the SCEEUS Commentary](#).

The overarching divergence between Russia and the existing European security order based on international law and fundamental OSCE principles, which Russia both violates and wants to replace, is a structural crisis that will last for a long time, regardless of how the current Russian-Ukrainian situation plays out. It is a systemic challenge for European security, at least for as long as Putin remains in power. It is not new and has been developing at least since 2007–2008.

The current status quo is clearly not acceptable to the Kremlin, which now wants to shift the tectonic plates of the European and Transatlantic security system more permanently to Russia's perceived advantage. It is acting now because it sees openings and opportunities to do so successfully.

What will be decided in the coming days and weeks is whether and in what form Russia will escalate militarily and with hybrid means against Ukraine. This is the short-term crisis we are facing. However, regardless of whether there will be a renewed Russian military incursion in Ukraine in the coming weeks, the crisis for European security will not go away. There is more than Ukraine at stake.

Moscow seems to have come to the conclusion that it has exhausted all other possibilities for gaining control over Ukraine. The purpose of an intensified use of military violence against Ukraine would be to gain political control over the country through intimidation or a change in Ukrainian political leadership. The main purpose of the military action would not be to gain territorial control in itself, although increased territorial control might serve the political aim of putting more pressure on Kyiv. A land bridge to Crimea or consolidation in Donbas could be positive side-effects of a larger military operation but would not be the reason for it.

From a Russian point of view, we are dealing with parallel, partly separate but interrelated issues: control over Ukraine, and establishing a new (or rather the lack of a) European security order involving, among other things, de facto respected spheres of influence in Russia's neighbourhood, and readjusting the military-strategic balance in Europe, which means in relation to the US. The latter concerns both the role of NATO and the strategic and conventional military balance in Europe.

Russia talk about “military-technical means” concerns the military-strategic balance in Europe, which Lavrov has clarified means the deployment of military hardware, and not military operations against Ukraine. This is about missile defence, the possibility of a new INF deal, and strategic and conventional arms control and limitations – including on deployment and exercises. Possible Russian actions in this field could be the deployment of a land-based version of Kalibr to Kaliningrad or Belarus, the repositioning nuclear weapons and posturing with hypersonic missiles. From a Russian point of view, Aegis Ashore, the US ballistic missile defence system in Poland and Romania, is an issue that must be addressed.

These military-technical means are a way of positioning Russia ahead of possible talks on arms control and strategic stability. There could be parallels with the early 1980s following NATO’s double-track decision in 1979. The question arises whether Scholtz is a new Helmut Schmidt.

Russia has used military violence as a means of achieving political goals in relationships with the West since Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014. This is a problem that the West has not been able to address successfully (changing Russia’s cost-benefit analysis) and we are now in all likelihood facing another military (and other means) escalation in Ukraine.

Russian action and Western reaction

On all these issues Moscow has the initiative and is formulating the agenda and setting the playing field. The West is in reactive mode, divided and wrong-footed.

Much now depends on Western actions and signalling vis-à-vis Moscow. Both Washington and the European Union (EU) have talked about “massive consequences” and “unprecedented measures”, but important question marks surround the possible content of such actions and how coordinated the Transatlantic community is. Current discussions seem to focus more on what is not on the table – the same table on which Moscow has placed a gun.

Germany and France now face stark choices and carry responsibility for Transatlantic and EU unity on the Russian challenge – as does Washington. There is a potential risk of US Alleingang, and that it might strike deals with Moscow that will necessarily affect Europe without Europeans present. There is as yet no common or shared realization within the Transatlantic community of the gravity of the Russian challenge, or of what is at stake and how to respond.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has promised Moscow a written answer to its demands. This is a double-edged sword and not without risks. Washington should use this opportunity to move from being reactive to proactive, to seize the initiative and set its own (Western) agenda. It should not accept the Russian framing of the agenda or the problem. The US answer should stand up for the European security order and hold Russia accountable for its violations of it, including its violations of its commitments with regard to e.g. democracy, human rights and the rule of law in, and Crimea, Georgia and Moldova. From a Washington perspective it is likely to be seen as an opportunity to buy time and consolidate a strong and united Western response to the military escalation against Ukraine. As argued above, however, this is not just about Ukraine. A wider discussion on the response to the Russian challenges to the European security order and the military balance in Europe has yet to mature.

At worst, a written US answer could be used by Moscow to legitimize an escalation (“Look, the US is not taking our security concerns seriously and we now have to take action”). A US answer will not satisfy Russia’s maximalist ultimatums as laid out in December but will in all likelihood contain elements that Moscow finds useable for possible extraction of concessions from the US and the West, as Washington tries to identify areas of common interest for further discussion. Moscow could use the perception that there is an ongoing diplomatic effort to put the brakes on a consolidated Western position by trying to sow further confusion and division among Western countries. The fact that the US has not made Russian de-escalation along the Ukrainian border a precondition for further talks is a missed opportunity and has strengthened Moscow’s position.

The ability and willingness of the US and Europe to rise to the challenge adequately will define US and EU credibility as geopolitical actors able to provide security, including in the South China Sea. We are entering a defining moment for the EU’s and the US positions both in Europe and globally. Unity is key and Moscow will of course continue to try to divide and rule.

The Kremlin seems willing to go to great lengths to achieve a more permanent shift in the security balance with the West, and to pay a considerable price for this. Political aims will on balance trump economic costs. High energy prices (and European dependence on Russian gas) are to Russia’s advantage, but the current crisis has also negatively affected the Russian stock exchange.

Russia has already achieved some of its goals. The West’s willingness to hold Russia accountable for its violations of its international commitments on democracy, human rights and the rule of law has diminished. The West has therefore at least tacitly accepted Russia’s insistence on “non-interference in internal matters”. We now hear little about Navalny or Memorial from Western governments.

This jeopardizes the OSCE comprehensive concept of security, which connects the dots between internal repression and external aggression. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are also relevant for security between states. The repression in Russia needs to be factored in as part of the crisis for European security. Nor is there any discussion of Russia’s already ongoing transgressions in Crimea, eastern Donbas, Georgia and Moldova, among others. It appears that many in the West will be happy as long as the situation does not deteriorate further.

The US has declared that it is prepared to discuss military transparency, arms control and risk reduction, including possible limitations on military exercises, with little consultation with its European partners on the possible content of such initiatives. This is a tricky field where the devil is in the detail and could affect the defensibility of a number of European countries, including Sweden and Finland. An additional benefit for Moscow is that the current crisis accelerates Belarusian integration with Russia, both politically and militarily.

Russia would seem to have the wind in its sails. Whatever the outcome of the current crisis, Moscow is likely to have progressed its long-term positions. The West is on the defensive. However, there is also a possibility that Moscow will overplay its hand and end up with an even more recalcitrant Ukraine, with increased defensibility of its neighbouring countries and paying a high political and economic price.

It is even possible to speculate that the Kremlin would be willing to accept a new cold war situation, in which Russia would be largely isolated from the West but with “clear rules of engagement”. This would mean clear Russian spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, a “balance” of military power that could include self-limitations on the Western military posture in Europe, and Russia as a “respected” equal to the US and NATO rather than on the strategic periphery. It is hard to see a scenario where European security is not weakened and the European security order further undermined.



Fredrik Löjdquist

Director of the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS).

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