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## **Why Is Russia Surging Troops to the Border Again?**

### ***Чому Росія знову наближає війська до кордону?***

*Нарощування російських військ на кордоні з Україною викликало занепокоєння багатьох на Заході щодо вторгнення. На переконання заступника директора Євразійського центру Атлантичної Ради М. Херінг, насправді відбувається не війна, а різні погляди та цілі НАТО. Скоріше, нарощування покликане підтримати чіткі вимоги, які В. Путін висунув Україні та Заходу. Аналітики кажуть, що Росія хоче постійних гарантій того, що такі країни, як Україна та інші країни колишнього СРСР, не приєднуються до НАТО і залишаться нейтральними.*

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2021-11-19/ukraine-crosshairs>

War clouds are gathering on the Russia-Ukraine border, as Moscow assembles a major force within striking distance of Kyiv for the second time this year.

The buildup of 100,000 troops and heavy equipment in Russia's western military sector, near Ukraine, has raised the fears of some in Kyiv and Washington that an invasion is imminent.

Analysts say the threat is real and seems unlikely to be drawn down, as happened following what looks like a full dress rehearsal last spring, after the Biden administration agreed to a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin and scaled back planned naval exercises in the Black Sea.

Russia's troop buildup on Ukraine's border has many in the West worried about invasion. But what's really going on appears to be not about war, but about differing views and goals for NATO.

But war is not Russia's goal, they add. Such a conflict would be prohibitively costly and intensely unpopular in Russia, which is home to the world's biggest Ukrainian diaspora and where many millions have family and close friends in Ukraine.

Rather, the buildup is meant to back up clear demands that Mr. Putin has delivered to Ukraine and the West. Analysts say that what Russia wants are permanent guarantees that countries like Ukraine and other former Soviet states will not join NATO and will remain neutral – as Finland was during the Cold War – as a new basis for regional stability. The aim of the troop deployments is to concentrate minds in Kyiv and the West about Moscow's concerns, they say.

“Putin said that ‘tension is good,’ meaning that our Western counterparts should be kept alarmed, only then will they take Russia's interests into account,” says Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, a leading Moscow-based foreign policy journal. “It looks like Putin wants to open a new chapter, to finally get the perception on the Western side that NATO enlargement is dead.”

#### Russian security

In a speech to the Russian foreign ministry last week, Mr. Putin slammed the West for dismissing Russia's “red lines” concerning Ukraine, and said that NATO's arming and military integration with Ukraine must end. He complained that two decades of NATO expansion into the region has brought a major threat to Russia's doorstep, and that Moscow will not tolerate Ukraine's potential membership in what it sees as a hostile military alliance.

Where Rep. Pramila Jayapal got her spine

“It is imperative to push for serious long-term guarantees that ensure Russia’s security in this area, because Russia cannot constantly be thinking about what could happen there tomorrow,” Mr. Putin said.

Though Ukraine’s NATO application has been temporarily shelved, the alliance has consistently maintained that Ukraine will eventually join. For the Kremlin, which has seen all the Soviet Union’s former Warsaw Pact allies and the three ex-Soviet Baltic States already integrated into the alliance, the prospect of NATO forces only a three-day march from Moscow was never going to be acceptable, says Mr. Lukyanov.

“Western leaders have believed for decades that every country has the right to join NATO, and NATO should accept them without taking into account the strategic implications,” he says. “That’s something new in history, it’s totally opposed to classical strategic thinking, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western leaders embraced this idea that NATO should just expand, that it was somehow the right thing to do, and that no one should oppose that. It’s an ideological belief, not one based on serious strategic or military calculations.

“When NATO enlargement began, back in the ’90s, no one expected Russia to recover as quickly as it has. But Russia is back, it is deeply concerned about its strategic neighborhood, and it needs to make clear that Ukraine must not join NATO. Putin’s point is that we need Western leaders to take that seriously, and not just in words.”

Mikhail Metzel/Sputnik/AP

Russian President Vladimir Putin gives his annual state of the nation address in Moscow, April 21, 2021, amid a Russian troop buildup near the border with Ukraine. Although that surge was drawn down after the White House agreed to a summit with Mr. Putin, a similar drawdown does not seem forthcoming for the current Russian troop deployment.

Loggerheads between Moscow and Kyiv

Part of Mr. Putin’s frustration may be that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who was elected largely on promises to bring peace to war-weary Ukraine, has made no headway in that area. Instead, Mr. Zelenskyy has appealed to the West to rapidly admit Ukraine into NATO and cancel Russia’s controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline, demanded that the Minsk 2 peace accords be revised, and taken other positions that infuriate Moscow.

“Russia is disillusioned with Zelenskyy, and sees no hope any longer that he might start a dialogue about ending the conflict,” says Andrei Kortunov, head of the Russian International Affairs Council, which is affiliated with the foreign ministry. “The mood in Moscow is that there is no point in talking with Kyiv, and we need to sort this out with Washington.”

The response in Kyiv seems surprisingly calm, perhaps thanks to the sense of permanent crisis since the Maidan revolution overthrew a Russia-friendly president and brought a pro-Western government to power in early 2014. That triggered Russia’s annexation of the mostly Russian-populated Crimean Peninsula and stimulated Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine’s east to rise against Kyiv. The resulting war, now grinding into its eighth year, has killed at least 14,000 people.

“It’s hard to measure the real threat,” says Nikolai Sungurovsky, a military expert at the independent Razumkov Centre in Kyiv. “The military threat is always there. Putin is trying to demonstrate that there can be no security solutions in Europe without Russia, but he is not willing to make any concessions about what concerns Ukraine.”

Vadim Karasyov, director of the independent Institute of Global Strategies in Kyiv, says, “I don’t see any direct threat of military invasion right now. Russian leaders might have their firm point of view, but they are not fools.”

#### No appetite for war in Russia

Though a low-level war has been going on for years, the Kremlin has largely kept its own involvement limited and mostly secret from the Russian people. Opinion polls in both countries consistently show that the populations have warm feelings toward each other, even if they hold each others’ leaders in low regard.

A February 2021 survey by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) found that 41% of Ukrainians had positive feelings toward Russia, while 42% felt negative. A similar poll conducted by the independent Levada Center in Moscow found that 54% of Russians felt positive toward Ukraine, compared with 31% who did not.

“I often say that the attitude of Ukrainians toward Russians and Russia is one of unrequited love,” says Vladimir Paniotto, director of KIIS. “That doesn’t apply to Russian leaders, toward whom only 12% of Ukrainians have a positive attitude, while 76% feel negatively. Bear in mind that about half of Ukrainians have relatives in Russia, so they do mentally separate the population from the government.”

A similar reality exists in Russia, which has about 3 million Ukrainians – including about 1 million refugees from the war – and incalculably deep, long-standing, and intricate relations between people.

“This situation is so painful, because so many of us have friends and relatives in Ukraine,” says Olga Kryshchanovskaya, a leading sociologist in Russia. “I, for one, have a Ukrainian husband, and regular contacts with his relatives in Ukraine. We are sick and tired of all these political tensions. We don’t trust our own politicians, and we certainly don’t want a war that arises out of all the lies being told on both sides. I don’t want to believe in a war. It would be incredibly unpopular with the Russian people.”

Mr. Kortunov agrees that Mr. Putin is playing a dangerous game by building up forces and flirting with military conflict to try and compel the West to discuss changes in Europe’s security order. But, like most Russians, he says actual open war with Ukraine is unthinkable.

“You have to ask yourself: Are Vladimir Putin and his team rational people? If you assume that they are – and, I assure you, yes they are – then we must acknowledge that Putin has no intention of starting a major war in the heart of Europe. Even if Russia were to win, the collateral damage would be immense, the costs too high to bear, and it would end any hope of reconciling with the West for a long time to come. Putin is concerned with his legacy, and he really wants to find some resolution of the Ukraine issue, but he is not going to start a war.”