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On Putin's Strategic Chessboard, a Series of Destabilizing Moves

На стратегічній шаховій дошці Путіна серія дестабілізуючих ходів

На ділянці Європи від Балтійського до Чорного моря, де Москва і Захід десятиліттями змагалися за вплив, зростає загроза нового військового конфлікту. Президент Росії В. Путін готовий піти на все більший ризик, щоб змусити Захід дослухатися вимог Росії.

Але саме Україна насамперед відповідає за нинішні «червоні лінії» Росії. Голова аналітичного центру Московського центру Карнегі Д. Тренін, вважає, що "Кремль все більше розглядає Україну як західний авіаносець", припаркований на південно-західному кордоні Росії.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/19/world/europe/russia-putin-belarus-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=6>

In the stretch of Europe from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, where Moscow and the West have competed for influence for decades, the threat of a new military conflict is growing.

VILNIUS, Lithuania — An ominous buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine. A migration crisis in Belarus that Western leaders call a “hybrid war” by a Kremlin client state. Escalating fears over natural gas that have Europe dreading a cold winter.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has, increasingly, put his cards on the table: He is willing to take ever-greater risks to force the West to listen to Russian demands. And America and its allies are sensing an unusually volatile moment, one in which Mr. Putin is playing a role in multiple destabilizing crises at once.

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This month, Russian long-range nuclear bombers flew repeated patrols near the European Union's border with Poland, and an unexplained and stealthy military buildup in southwestern Russia has American and European intelligence officials warning that the Kremlin could be laying the groundwork for a new invasion of Ukraine.

A photo taken from video released by the Russian Defense Ministry press service shows Russian warplanes patrolling in the airspace over Belarus this month. Credit...Russian Defense Ministry Press Service, via Associated Press

During a speech Thursday to Russian diplomats, Mr. Putin signaled more openly than before that he was using his military to coerce the West to respect Russia's interests in the region. He said that Western countries were finally recognizing that Russia was serious about defending its “red lines” that relate to the presence of NATO forces near its borders.

“Our recent warnings have indeed been heard and are having a certain effect: tensions have risen there, after all,” Mr. Putin said. “It is important for them to remain in this state for as long as possible, so that it does not occur to them to stage some kind of conflict on our western frontiers that we do not need.”

Tensions have been exacerbated by the migration crisis orchestrated on the European Union's borders by Belarus, a close Russian ally, and by an energy crunch that Russia, which supplies much of Western

Europe's natural gas, has used to try to pressure the bloc to approve a new pipeline that would increase the Kremlin's leverage in the region.

"It's a regional security situation which is very worrying at the moment," said Asta Skaisgiryte, the foreign policy adviser to the president of Lithuania, an E.U. and NATO member that has faced a wave of migration from neighboring Belarus in recent months.

In Belarus on Friday, tensions that earlier this week triggered violent clashes at the main border crossing into Poland continued to ease. Belarusian security officers carrying Kalashnikov rifles kept guard around a huge warehouse housing around 2,000 migrants.

Many of the migrants voiced alarm and frustration that, instead of advancing into Poland, they had now moved backward, suggesting that President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko of Belarus could have trouble keeping anger from boiling over if migrants lose all hope of reaching Europe.

In Moscow, Mr. Putin appears to feel increasingly confident. He repelled this year's challenge to his rule from the imprisoned opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny, while other opposition figures continue to be arrested or forced into exile. He maintains an approval rating above 60 percent in independent polls, despite Russia suffering one of the worst Covid-19 death tolls in the world. His United Russia party claimed a sizable victory in September's parliamentary elections, prompting few protests despite evidence of fraud.

Mr. Putin also commands a military developing ever-more-modern weaponry, such as sophisticated hypersonic missiles and nuclear-capable torpedoes. And Russia is building a tighter partnership with China, underscored on Friday when the two countries conducted a joint strategic bomber patrol over the Pacific.

At the same time, Russian analysts say, the Kremlin is growing increasingly concerned about the possibility that the West will further expand its military footprint in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. Lithuania and the other two Baltic states that were once part of the Soviet Union, Latvia and Estonia, are already NATO members hosting Western troops. In Belarus, Russia's closest ally, the West has given full-throated support to the exiled opposition to Mr. Lukashenko.

But it is Ukraine that is primarily responsible for Russia's current "red lines." The Kremlin said in September that the "broadening of NATO infrastructure on Ukrainian territory" — where the West already provides training and weaponry to Ukrainian forces — would cross one of those lines. And in recent weeks, military activity by the United States and its allies in the Black Sea region near Ukraine, where President Volodymyr Zelensky has struck an increasingly anti-Russian tone, has infuriated Russian officials.

Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, said that to Russia, the current moment could well seem like a role reversal of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when President John F. Kennedy was prepared to risk nuclear war to prevent the Soviet Union from basing missiles off the Florida coast. Scholars at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington wrote this month that the "Kremlin increasingly views Ukraine as a Western aircraft carrier" parked at Russia's southwestern border.

“He believes that it’s time to shift gears in our foreign policy,” Mr. Trenin said of Mr. Putin’s new approach. In the Russian president’s evolving view of the West, he went on, “you only understand the language of force.”

Amid the tensions, Russia is pursuing talks with Washington on a range of issues as a prelude to a second summit meeting between Mr. Putin and President Biden — a sign that the Kremlin hopes to extract assurances that its influence in Eastern Europe will be respected. On Thursday, without offering further details, Mr. Putin said Russia would push for “serious long-term guarantees that ensure Russia’s security” in the region.

Mr. Biden has said he is seeking a “stable and predictable” relationship with Russia, while pledging to continue to push back against Russian actions that go against democratic values or American interests. In an interview with *The New York Times* last week, a Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergey A. Ryabkov, welcomed Mr. Biden’s engagement, while making it clear that Russia would expect concessions.

To Russia, Mr. Ryabkov said, stability and predictability meant “less American meddling in our domestic affairs, with less attempts by the U.S. to limit our completely legal and legitimate interaction with our friends, allies and partners all over the globe.”

Russia has hosted a series of American officials for talks in Moscow in recent months, including William Burns, the head of the C.I.A., and, this week, the American envoy for Afghan policy, Thomas West. On Wednesday, Jake Sullivan, Mr. Biden’s national security adviser, spoke by phone with Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Mr. Putin’s Security Council; Mr. Patrushev’s office said the call concerned “upcoming contacts” between the presidents and “improving the atmosphere of Russian-American relations.”

“I welcome signs of readiness on the other side not just to produce and promote its own points and views,” Mr. Ryabkov, the deputy foreign minister, said, “but also to listen to what we are telling them.”

Before he sat down with Mr. Putin in Geneva in June, Mr. Biden met with leaders of the Baltic countries to assure them that the United States would continue to honor its defense commitments under the NATO alliance. The administration, people familiar with its thinking said, believes more direct talks — including possibly a conversation between Mr. Biden and Mr. Putin — will be necessary to further understand Moscow’s intentions, rather than simply relying on old-school Kremlinology.

But Ms. Skaisgiryte, the Lithuanian foreign-policy official, said the United States needed to be careful in engaging with Russia even as Mr. Putin claims, as he did on Thursday, that Russia is a “peace-loving” state.

“We have to not be naïve,” Ms. Skaisgiryte said. “We have to be very vigilant about what he does on the ground, and not to put ourselves into the trap of Putin’s rhetoric.”

What does Mr. Putin want? Ms. Skaisgiryte’s answer is simple: “To restore the Soviet Union.”

Mr. Trenin, the Carnegie analyst, said Mr. Putin had little interest in full-fledged invasions and occupations of other countries, given that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s helped precipitate the collapse of the Soviet Union. But he said securing an international commitment to

Ukraine as a neutral state, with its more pro-Russian east being given some autonomy, was a critical priority for the Kremlin.

“President Putin has come to the conclusion that normal diplomatic channels, means, forms and methods are not working,” Mr. Trenin said. “The situation is, potentially, a rather bad one.”

Andrew Higgins contributed reporting from Bruzgi, Belarus, and Julian E. Barnes contributed from Washington.