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Russian Foreign Policy: Shifting Gears

Is Ukraine that “unfinished business” that he will seek to complete before the end of his reign? Or is Putin just bluffing?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin. **kremlin.ru**

President Vladimir Putin often makes statements on foreign policy. Just last month, he spent several hours discussing world affairs at the annual Valdai Club meeting; more recently, he gave a wide-ranging interview to Russian TV, in which he discussed Ukraine, Belarus, NATO, and the United States. His appearance on Nov. 18 at a gathering of Russian Foreign Ministry senior officials resulted in a public speech and more private discussions, which of course remain confidential.

The speech was fairly short, but made several important new points. The most interesting and intriguing passage concerned Russia’s adversaries: the United States, its NATO allies, and clients such as Ukraine.

“Our recent warnings have had a certain effect: tensions have arisen there anyway,” Putin told the assembled officials. “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... we do not need a new conflict,” the Russian president added.

Putin did not mean diplomatic warnings. Diplomacy is de facto paralyzed in Russia’s relations with Ukraine, NATO, the European Union’s leading powers such as Germany and France, and with the United States as far as Ukraine is concerned.

The Kremlin has at this point completely written off Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as a negotiating partner.

In exasperation with the Europeans de facto siding with Kiev against Moscow on the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, the Foreign Ministry published diplomatic correspondence between its head Sergey Lavrov and his counterparts in Paris and Berlin; according to Sergei Ryabkov, Lavrov’s deputy, recent exchanges on Ukraine with visiting U.S. Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland produced zero results and zero understanding in Washington of Moscow’s arguments. The Kremlin also responded to NATO’s expulsion of Russian officers attached to Moscow’s mission to Brussels by severing all ties with the alliance.

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Instead, the warnings the Russian president was likely referring to are the activities of the Russian military. At the beginning of the year, the Russian Defense Ministry held a major exercise that included a concentration of significant forces along the entire length of the border with Ukraine: to its north, east, and south. Russian troop movements were made clearly visible, and carried the chilling message that it might not be a drill.

Dmitry Kozak, the Kremlin point man on Donbass and relations with Kiev, repeated Putin’s earlier warning that a Ukrainian attempt to retake the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk regions — à la then Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili’s doomed adventure in South Ossetia in 2008 — would mean the end of the present Ukrainian state. Indeed, the exercises were taken seriously by the Americans. General Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, engaged in direct consultations with General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff.

Finally, U.S. President Joe Biden invited Vladimir Putin to a meeting in Geneva which resulted in a resumption of U.S.-Russian strategic stability talks.

Yet there was no de-escalation with regard to Ukraine, the Black Sea region, and, more broadly, Eastern Europe. During the summer, a British Navy destroyer challenged Russia by sailing through territorial waters off Crimea, and Ukraine passed legislation that denied ethnic Russians the status of an indigenous community and prepared to adopt another law that, in Moscow’s view, would be tantamount to Kiev formally leaving the Minsk accords.

In Donbass, the Ukrainians used a Turkish-made drone to strike pro-Russian forces; NATO significantly increased its presence and activity in the Black Sea; and U.S. strategic bombers

flew missions as close as 20 kilometers from the Russian border, according to Putin. The gas price crunch in Europe provoked bitter accusations that Russia had caused it.

Even the migrant crisis on Poland's border, part of a plan by Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko to punish the EU and coerce its leaders into a dialogue with him, was blamed directly on the Kremlin. What some in Moscow had prematurely called the "spirit of Geneva" all but evaporated.

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Not that Russia was doing nothing to respond to and even get ahead of its adversaries. Russia allowed half a million of its newly acquired citizens in Donbass to vote in the September elections to the State Duma; made the produce of Donbass enterprises eligible for Russian government purchases; and stopped coal deliveries to Ukraine.

Both President Putin and former president Dmitry Medvedev, now serving as deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, published long articles that were scathingly critical of the policies of the Ukrainian authorities and essentially concluded that there was no use talking to Kiev anymore.

Against that background, reports appeared in the United States suggesting that Russia was again massing its forces on the border, and possibly preparing to invade Ukraine sooner rather than later.

Right now, fears of a war in Ukraine are widespread. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has warned the Kremlin not to try to repeat what it did in 2014, lest it regret it. In fact, the stakes are much higher today than they were seven-plus years ago.

In 2014, Putin, having received a mandate from the Russian parliament to use military force "in Ukraine," limited its factual use to Crimea, plus, in a covert form, Donbass. Next time, as Putin's own words suggest, the geographic scope of Russian military action, should the Russian commander-in-chief order it, is likely to be much broader.

Those speculating what form it might take need not look at the ancient precedents of Afghanistan, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary. It makes more sense to look at Syria, except that a war in Ukraine may not be contained.

Will President Putin make the fateful decision?

Is Ukraine that "unfinished business" that he will seek to complete before the end of his reign? Or is Putin just bluffing? A few things are clear.

NATO membership or not, seeing Ukraine turn into a U.S.-controlled unsinkable aircraft carrier parked on Russia's border just a few hundred miles from Moscow — an apt comparison by my Carnegie colleagues in Washington — is no more acceptable to the Kremlin than that other unsinkable aircraft carrier, Cuba, was to the White House almost sixty years ago. Any Russian leader would seek to prevent such anchorage, using whatever means they have at their disposal.

Another contingency would be massive military action by Ukrainian forces in Donbass, however unlikely that may seem in the West.

What Saakashvili did in trying to retake South Ossetia by force back in 2008 never looked too clever to begin with, and yet he was not stopped by Georgia's senior ally. In his speech to diplomats on Thursday, Putin called Western countries unreliable. In particular, he accused them of only "superficially" acknowledging Russia's red lines and warnings — whatever he may have meant by that "superficiality."

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Putin has called on Lavrov to provide Russia with "serious long-term guarantees" in the Euro-Atlantic region. That sounds puzzling. There is little that Russian diplomats can do to procure for Putin what he wants. More likely, the head of state may be exhorting his diplomats to exploit the fruits of military deterrence that Putin is busy organizing around Ukraine, in the Black Sea region, and elsewhere in Europe's east.

The Russian president is not, of course, leaving that task entirely to his subordinates. Even as he was delivering his hardline speech, his Security Council secretary was in talks with the U.S. National Security Adviser about another possible meeting between Putin and Biden. As always with deterrence, it can only work if the threat is believed to be credible, while any attempt to test whether the other side is bluffing may end in disaster.

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