The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Are Russia and Ukraine Once Again on the Brink of War?

The West finds itself facing the uncomfortable dilemma of whether to boost Russia's status or to refuse to give Moscow the promises it desires, thus conserving the conflict in its heated state.

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December 01, 2021



Valentin Sprinchak / TASS

Once again, the world is discussing the possibility of Russia waging war against Ukraine. This time, however, the circumstances are extraordinary.

Back in the spring, the buildup of Russian troops for military drills close to Ukraine's borders ended in a series of communications between the U.S. president and the leaders of Russia and Ukraine, followed by the summit this summer between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden. At the time, that flare-up in tensions was explained as being down to the desire to put the Donbass conflict firmly on the agenda of the new U.S. president and to

force new talks on the issue.

Although the current escalation appears similar to that of the spring, a whole host of new circumstances has been thrown into the mix.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has broken a diplomatic taboo by publishing confidential correspondence with Germany and France over Ukraine: something that would have needed to be approved at the very top.

Speaking at the Foreign Ministry soon after this, Putin called for "serious, long-term guarantees that ensure Russia's security in this area [its Western borders], because Russia cannot constantly be thinking about what could happen there tomorrow."

It's not clear what form such guarantees would take, but it's likely that ahead of another possible summit between Putin and Biden, Moscow would like to receive assurances similar to those made to Beijing: not to enter into an open conflict with China, and not to try to change the Chinese political system. Instead of such assurances, however, Russia has seen Western military vessels close to Russia's borders, and a resolution introduced to the U.S. Congress that would automatically declare Putin's rule illegitimate beyond the next elections in 2024.

It seems that Russia does not have the same sway as China to obtain the promises that one superpower has given another. As a recent superpower, Russia considers this particularly unpleasant, and the simmering conflict in eastern Ukraine could be used to give it more clout.

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The West finds itself, therefore, facing the uncomfortable dilemma of whether to boost Russia's status, thereby rewarding the dangerous exploitation of a simmering conflict, or to refuse to give Moscow the promises it desires, thus conserving the conflict in its heated state.

Russia's action of releasing the diplomatic correspondence and Putin's call for guarantees can be interpreted in two ways. Either Moscow has information that Kiev is seriously considering a military solution to the problem of the Donbass separatists, or Russia itself is preparing for a military operation in eastern Ukraine, and these overwrought statements are an attempt to absolve itself of responsibility for its future actions: alas, Moscow had warned of the coming storm, and called for action, but to no avail.

The problem is that if implemented, the first scenario of Ukraine taking back Donbass by force would instantly turn into the second: of Russia invading Ukraine. Western journalists and politicians would not have enough time to decide who started it, nor indeed the motivation, since Ukraine would be acting on territory internationally recognized as its own, unlike Russia, which would inevitably be designated the aggressor.

Even if Russia were only responding to action taken by Ukraine, it would still be seen as invading: something the West has warned against. Determining how proportionate a response was to the use of force would be a long and difficult process.

In Kiev, the tone of Moscow's statements is seen as a sign that Russia itself is preparing to strike first, and is simply trying to push responsibility for resumed hostilities elsewhere.

Russia vividly recalls Georgia's attempt to regain control over South Ossetia in 2008, which was thwarted by Russia's intervention.

Despite the fact that Georgia's proactive role in the events of the six-day war is now much clearer (thanks to Wikileaks and the Tagliavini report), that war is still broadly cited as an example of Russian aggression and occupation, since it unfolded on territory internationally accepted as part of Georgia, albeit at the location of a frozen conflict. Georgia's then president Mikheil Saakashvili's attack on South Ossetia is still considered to have been prompted by a deliberate provocation by separatists and Moscow.

In a situation in which the two sides suspect each other of harboring the worst intentions, and with every hour counting at the start of military action, the South Ossetia scenario could unfold of its own accord. A confrontation on the Donbass demarcation line that goes beyond the regular clashes could prompt a response like that over Ossetia: why wait for the worst to happen?

Nor would it be hard to manufacture such an event, should there be any desire to do so.

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If the West views any events in Donbass in the broader context of a Russian attack on Ukraine's territorial integrity, and even the restoration of the Russian empire, many in Moscow see those same events as an attack by the Kiev authorities on the integrity of ethnic Russians.

In his recent article on Ukrainian history, Putin wrote in startlingly harsh terms about the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of Russians, comparing it to the use of weapons of mass destruction.

A man who holds such views is unlikely to simply step down from his post without even trying to stop such an adverse turn of events. What would his successors say?

After all, Ukraine was offered the decent option of the Minsk agreements and voluntary federalization, while the West was offered Ukrainian neutrality. The options left are the bad ones.

Russia, for its part, is discovering its own worst option. For three decades, the greatest fear of the Russian leadership was that Ukraine (and Belarus) would join NATO and move Western military infrastructure right up to Russia's borders. Now it turns out that that can happen even without NATO, and in more real and long-term and less predictable ways.

An aggrieved country that is building its entire identity on the rejection of everything Russian is far easier to turn into a fortified area on Russia's border than a country confined by NATO procedures.

In the absence of any security guarantees from a bloc, that country will be ready at the drop of a hat to welcome foreign aircraft, ships, and troops, and to equip its own army, leaping into action out of fear.

Russia's military preparations, the publication of the confidential correspondence, and Putin's call for guarantees on its southwestern flank signal that Moscow has recognized the danger of coexisting with such a fortified area and does not want to accept it, but doesn't yet know what to do about it.

For now, Moscow and Kiev are opting to increase their own significance by showing how — with their restrained and responsible behaviour — they are saving humanity from the danger of a global conflict into which the opposite side would readily drag the world.

This article was first published *by the Carnegie Moscow Center.*

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