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Research Briefing

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Ukraine: Russia's "red line"



Summary

1 What has been happening in Ukraine since 2014?
2 On the precipice of a new crisis
3 International response

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Contents

Summary		**4**
1	**What has been happening in Ukraine since 2014?**	**6**
1.1	Build-up of Russian forces on the border – March/April 2021	7
2	**On the precipice of a new crisis**	**9**
2.1	Echoes of the 2014 “play book”	10
2.2	Russia’s “red lines”	12
	Russian calls for security guarantees	14
3	**International response**	**18**
3.1	Diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation	19
	The outcome of security talks – January 2022	20
	Further US-Russia talks	22
	US and NATO responses to Russian security proposals	23
	Meeting of the Normandy Format	25
3.2	What happens next?	26
3.3	Deterrence as well as diplomacy	27
	Bolstering NATO’s presence in Eastern Europe	27
	Additional military assistance to Ukraine	29
	Economic sanctions	29
3.4	What is the UK Government’s position on Ukraine?	33

Summary

In early November 2021 Russia began building up its military forces along the borders of Ukraine, for the second time in a year. Over 100,000 Russian military personnel and assets have been deployed in Crimea and in the Voronezh, Kursk and Bryansk regions of Western Russia. Russian naval assets from the Baltic and Northern fleets have deployed to the Black Sea and 30,000 Russian troops are currently on exercise in Belarus, close to the Ukrainian border.

Tensions have escalated following a US intelligence assessment in December 2021, which suggested that Russia could be planning an invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

Russia's "red lines"

Russia has denied suggestions that it is planning to invade and has linked its actions to what it regards as provocative actions by NATO. Russia is seeking longer term security guarantees from the Alliance that Ukraine will not be admitted as a Member State and that NATO military infrastructure will not be deployed in the country. The Kremlin has said these are "red lines" for Russia's national security.

International response

Western nations have made clear their support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and its right to choose its security partnerships. They have warned Russia that any military escalation will have significant economic consequences. Among measures being discussed are sanctions against Russia's financial institutions, energy sector, and individuals close to the Kremlin. Russia's controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Europe could be halted as part of any sanctions package. Military assistance from the UK, US, NATO and the EU is also being provided to Ukraine.

Diplomatic talks

Diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation are underway. A series of meetings between the US, NATO, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Russia were held in mid-January. Those

meetings discussed Ukraine, but also European security more broadly, including Russian proposals for legally binding security guarantees between the US, NATO and Russia. Talks aimed at achieving a political solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine also resumed between the countries of the Normandy Format: Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany.

No breakthroughs were achieved, and Russia did not commit to de-escalate and withdraw forces from the Ukrainian border.

What happens next?

Russia has since been accused by the West of planning a series of aggressive moves against Ukraine as a pretext for military action, allegations which it denies. Russia stands by its statement that it has no plans to invade Ukraine and President Putin has accused the US of trying to draw Russia into a war.

In mid-February the Russian Ministry of Defence said that several units had begun to withdraw from the region back to their permanent locations, having completed their exercises. NATO said it had not seen any signs of de-escalation on the ground, thus far. In the meantime, shelling between pro-Russian separatist forces and Ukrainian government forces in eastern Ukraine has increased.

Diplomacy continues with several world leaders having visited Moscow for talks in recent weeks. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether the Kremlin will agree to NATO's proposal for more substantive security talks in the longer term. A Russian response to the US's counter proposals on legally binding security guarantees was received by the US administration on 17 February and is currently being considered.

On 14 February 2022, however, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said "I think our opportunities are far from exhausted. Of course, they should not be endless, but I think we should still continue to pursue and build on them at this point".

Deterrence as well as diplomacy

In the meantime, NATO allies have moved to shore up the defence of eastern Europe with the deployment of additional ships and fighter aircraft to the region. Further consideration is being given to the deployment of additional battlegroups in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe.

NATO forces will not be deployed on the ground, however, as Ukraine is a partner country of the alliance and not party to NATO's Article V mutual defence clause.

1 What has been happening in Ukraine since 2014?

Over 14,000 people are estimated to have died in the conflict.

International Crisis Group

Russian-backed separatists took control of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine (the Donbas) in 2014.

The 2014 and 2015 Minsk agreements remain the basis for the negotiation of a political solution to the conflict.[1] Those agreements included:

- a full and immediate ceasefire to be monitored by the OSCE,
- the withdrawal of heavy weaponry by both sides,
- the withdrawal of all foreign armed groups, and
- constitutional reform which recognises the special status of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk.

In July 2020 additional measures were agreed by the Minsk Trilateral Contact Group (whose members include Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE), intended to strengthen, and ensure compliance with, the ceasefire. The Minsk agreements remain, however, largely unimplemented by both sides.

Russia has continued to integrate Crimea within Russian territory and attempted to destabilise Ukraine. The Donbas is mainly Russian speaking and many of the population now have Russian passports after a concerted campaign by the Kremlin since 2019 to issue passports to Ukrainian nationals living in the separatist controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk.[2] In September 2021 citizens in Crimea and the separatist controlled regions of Donetsk and Luhansk were eligible to take part in Russia's parliamentary elections and in October Russia began conducting a population census in Crimea.

Fighting between Russian-supported separatists and Ukrainian government forces has also continued in the Donbas, even though it has rarely been in the headlines. Russia describes the Donbas as a domestic conflict for Ukraine, despite the widespread allegations that it is behind the separatist unrest. The Kremlin has consistently denied its involvement, suggesting that any Russian fighters in eastern Ukraine are "volunteers".[3]

1 The agreements were reached following talks involving Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany under a process referred to as the Normandy Format.

2 Since 2019 a reported 650,000 Russian passports have been issued, resulting in what some analysts have called a "passport protectorate". See for example, "Russian passports: Putin's secret weapon in the war against Ukraine", Atlantic Council, 13 April 2021

3 "Ukraine conflict: Moscow could 'defend' Russia-backed rebels", BBC News Online, 9 April 2021

In March 2021 the G7 nations recognised, however, that Russia is "a party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine, not a mediator".[4]



Source: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2019

Tensions have been rising over the course of 2021. Ceasefire violations have become increasingly commonplace and casualties are on the rise.

1.1 Build-up of Russian forces on the border – March/April 2021

In March and April 2021 Russia amassed an estimated 100,000 troops on the ground in Crimea and along the borders of Eastern Ukraine, prompting fears of further military action in the region.[5] The Russian Government's official line was that the movement of military personnel and assets had been related to ongoing training exercises. Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, accused NATO of provocative actions by amassing troops and equipment on Russia's Baltic borders and in the Black Sea region and suggested that the movement of Russian forces was to subsequently test combat readiness in response to "threatening behaviour" by the Alliance.[6]

Separately the Russian Government also accused Ukraine of preparing an offensive of its own to re-take the Donbas and stated that Russia would be

4 G7 Foreign Ministers' statement on Ukraine, 18 March 2021

5 This was a greater number than the force involved in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 which was estimated at 90,000 Russian military personnel deployed in support of local pro-Russian separatist groups in the Donbas region. See "Russian forces in Ukraine", RUSI Briefing Paper, March 2015

6 "Russia says troop build up near Ukraine is a response to NATO", The Independent, 13 April 2021

forced to come to the defence of Russian citizens in eastern Ukraine if the fighting escalated.[7]

However, Russia announced that it would re-deploy its forces back to their home bases by 1 May, temporarily averting the crisis. Questions were raised at the time, as to whether Russia would re-deploy the forces it had amassed at the border and in Crimea itself.

While many had feared the Russian military build-up to be a precursor to a limited military intervention in eastern Ukraine, other commentators suggested that Russia's intention was to test the political resolve of NATO and the new Biden administration in their support for Ukraine's sovereignty. It was also considered a useful demonstration of Russia's capacity to act in the region if it feels its interests, or its citizens, are threatened.[8]

1 Further reading

- Explaining Ukraine-Russia relations, Chatham House, 24 November 2021

7 "Donbas escalation would be beginning of the end for Ukraine", The Moscow Times, 8 April 2021

8 See for example Tim Ripley and Thomas Bullock "Russian troop build-up sparks concern in Ukraine", Jane's Intelligence Review, 9 April 2021; Elena Ostanina and Alex Kokcharov, "Russian military build-up on Ukraine's borders: war risk scenarios", Jane's Intelligence Review, 8 April 2021. The use of "peacekeeping forces" to protect what the Kremlin considers Russian citizens in the post-Soviet space has also long been recognised as a tool of Russian foreign policy (see for example "Will they stay or will they go?: Russian peacekeepers in the post-Soviet space", Radio Free Europe, 12 November 2020)

2 On the precipice of a new crisis

In early November 2021 reports started to emerge of a fresh build-up of Russian military forces in Crimea and at various points along Ukraine's borders.[9]

Combined with significant military assets retained in the area following the previous military build-up in Spring 2021,[10] over 100,000 Russian personnel are now deployed in the region, beyond what Jane's defence analysts have called the "regular cycle of Russian ground troops".[11]

Forces are equipped with "high end capabilities", including main battle tanks, self-propelled howitzers, infantry fighting vehicles, air defence missile systems, attack helicopters, drones and rocket launchers. Among Russian military forces are elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army, that has redeployed from its permanent base in the Western Military District to the Voronezh region, less than 250km from Ukraine's border. The 1st Guards Tank Army has been described as "one of Russia's premier fighting formations" which receives the latest equipment and is the "primary formation for the testing of new equipment and tactics".[12] Air defence units have also been deployed to the region from eastern Siberia, which is thousands of miles away. The BBC's Security Correspondent, Frank Gardner, has described the "scale, magnitude and configuration of Russia's deployment close to Ukraine's borders" as "unprecedented".[13]

Several naval assets from the Baltic and Northern fleets were reported in November 2021 heading south through the English Channel. Their destination was expected to be the Black Sea.[14] In February 2022 the Russian Ministry of Defence announced that several vessels of the Baltic and Northern fleets had entered the Black Sea for naval exercises.[15]

9 "Force monitoring indicates developing situation on Ukrainian border", Jane's Defence Weekly, 5 November 2021

10 "Russia moves equipment to Crimea, continues to activate other units", Jane's Defence Weekly (online), 18 November 2021 (accessed on 7 December 2021) and "False de-escalation: The continuing Russian threat to Ukraine and the Black Sea region", RUSI Commentary, 24 June 2021 (accessed on 8 December 2021)

11 "Force monitoring indicates developing situation on Ukrainian border", Jane's Defence Weekly (online), 5 November 2021 (accessed on 7 December 2021)

12 "Force monitoring indicates developing situation on Ukrainian border", Jane's Defence Weekly (online), 5 November 2021 (accessed on 7 December 2021)

13 BBC News, "Ukraine: Satellite images show Russian military activity", 17 February 2022

14 "Russia moves equipment to Crimea, continues to activate other units", Jane's Defence Weekly (online), 18 November 2021 (accessed on 7 December 2021)

15 Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, Press release, 8 February 2022

Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate reported increased activity between Russian military and separatist forces in Donetsk and Luhansk. Readiness drills are reported to have been conducted, along with the delivery of fuel, electronic warfare equipment and unmanned aerial vehicles to separatist forces.[16]

In early December 2021 a US intelligence assessment suggested that Russia was amassing a force of up to 175,000 troops in preparation for an invasion in early 2022.[17] Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, described the escalation as "psychological pressure" from Russia.[18]

2.1 Echoes of the 2014 "play book"

At a press briefing on 14 January 2022, less than a day after talks at the OSCE concluded (see below), the US Department of Defense revealed that there had been "credible reports" Russia was working towards creating a pretext for an invasion of Ukraine by preparing "false flag operations". Undertaken by pre-positioned Russian operatives "trained in urban warfare and in using explosives to carry out acts of sabotage",[19] such operations would target those forces in eastern Ukraine supported by Russia, or the local Russian speaking population, thereby providing a justification for Russian intervention.[20]

A Russian campaign of disinformation, helping to create a false pretext for intervention in Ukraine and sow divisions in the country is also reportedly being witnessed.[21] White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, said on 14 January:

> As part of its plans, Russia is laying the groundwork to have the option of fabricating a pretext for invasion [...] including through sabotage activities and information operations, by accusing Ukraine of preparing an imminent attack against Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine. And the Russian military plans to begin these activities several weeks before a military invasion, which could begin between mid-January and mid-February.[22]

16 "Russia builds up forces on Ukrainian border", Jane's Defence Weekly, 9 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

17 "Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine", The Washington Post (online), 3 December 2021 (accessed 10 December 2021)

18 "Ukraine immune to psychological pressure from Russia – Zelensky", Interfax Ukraine, 11 November 2021 (accessed 10 December 2021)

19 White House, Press briefing, 14 January 2022

20 US Department of Defense, Press briefing, 14 January 2022.

21 See US Department of State, Disarming disinformation: our shared responsibility, 25 January 2022 and EU External Action Service, Disinformation about the current Russia-Ukraine conflict: seven myths debunked, 24 January 2022

22 White House, Press briefing, 14 January 2022

Ukraine has also blamed Russia for a mass cyberattack on Ukrainian government institutions on 14 January and in mid-February, although Western nations have stopped short of doing the same.[23]

Western allies have suggested the preparation of such operations are part of the Russian "play book" that was also witnessed in the weeks before the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In a statement to the House on 17 January 2022, Defence Secretary Ben Wallace commented:

> In recent weeks, we have observed hardening Russian rhetoric, heightened cyber-activity and widespread disinformation that could serve to provide a false pretext for a Russian military intervention. False narratives are very much part of the Kremlin's playbook; they were used in 2008 before Russia's invasion of Georgia, and in Ukraine in 2014. False narratives are being peddled again today: Russia has suggested that its military build-up on the border of Ukraine is in response to NATO aggression and an agenda by the west to use Ukraine to divide and rule the Russian nation. It has put forward this outlandish notion that NATO is attempting to encircle Russia.

On 22 January 2022, the UK also accused Russia of plotting to install a pro-Russian 'puppet' leader in Kyiv, as it "considers whether to invade and occupy Ukraine".[24]

Russia has dismissed all of the allegations, calling them "unfounded"[25] and accused the "Anglo-Saxon nations" within NATO of "escalating tensions around Ukraine".[26]

However, fears of an imminent Russian invasion have heightened following the deployment of significant Russian military assets to Belarus, which also borders Ukraine. Belarus announced that an unscheduled joint exercise would be held with Russia on the western and southern borders of the country. President Lukashenko said: "this will be a normal exercise focused on a certain plan of opposition to these forces: the West (the Baltic states and Poland) and the south (Ukraine)". Russia is reported to have deployed 30,000 combat troops, aircraft, S-400 air defence systems and "other advanced capabilities"[27] ahead of the joint army exercise, which began on 10 February 2022.[28] The NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, suggested "these are highly capable, combat ready troops" and that the lack of transparency on these deployments was adding to the tension in the region.[29] The exercises are scheduled to continue until 20 February. Whether Russian forces depart

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23 NATO, Statement by the NATO Secretary General on cyber attacks against Ukraine, 14 January 2022 and White House, Press briefing, 16 February 2022

24 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Press release, 22 January 2022

25 The Moscow Times, "US says Russia readying 'false-flag' operation to invade Ukraine", 14 January 2022

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Twitter account, 23 January 2022

27 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 26 January 2022

28 President of the Republic of Belarus, Meeting to discuss plan of Belarus-Russia joint army exercise, 17 January 2022

29 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 26 January 2022

after this time is considered a potential indicator of President Putin's intentions.[30]

White House Press Secretary, Jen Psaki has called the situation "extremely dangerous" and suggested that "we're now at a stage where Russia could at any point launch an attack in Ukraine".[31]

While acknowledging the threat posed by Russian forces on Ukraine's borders, Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, suggested at a press briefing on 26 January, however, that "at the moment, as we speak, this number is insufficient for a full-scale offensive against Ukraine along the entire Ukrainian border".[32]

In a press conference on 28 January 2022 Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also reportedly called on the West not to create panic, suggesting that the US was "making a mistake" in highlighting the risks of a Russian invasion. However, he also acknowledged the possibility of escalation.[33]

2.2 Russia's "red lines"

In July 2021 President Putin published an essay on The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians in which he said: "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia… for we are one people".[34]

To resolve the "intra-Ukraine" conflict, Russia is firm in the view that there must be full and consistent compliance with the Minsk Agreements (see section 1), which the Kremlin states that it continues to support through the mediation efforts of the Contact Group.[35]

Russia has accused Ukraine of "dismantling the Minsk process", with the support of the West.[36] It also alleges that Ukraine is seeking to militarise the Donbas and has deployed 125,000 armed forces personnel armed with heavy weaponry in eastern Ukraine, in direct contravention of the Minsk agreement.[37]

In remarks to the Russian Federal Assembly on 1 December 2021, Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, accused NATO states of an "openly destructive

30 BBC News, "Ukraine: Satellite images show Russian military activity", 17 February 2022
31 White House, Press briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, 18 January 2022
32 CNN, "Ukrainian Foreign Minister says current Russian troop numbers insufficient for full invasion", 26 January 2022
33 Deutsche Welle, "Ukraine tells West not to panic over Russia tensions", 28 January 2022
34 President Vladimir Putin, On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians, 12 July 2021
35 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks on Russia's foreign policy priorities, Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2021
36 Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, 1 December 2021 and President of Russia, Expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board, 18 November 2021
37 Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, 1 December 2021

stance", and of seeking to "pull Ukraine into their orbit and turn it into an 'anti-Russia'".[38] He highlighted the military support being provided to Ukraine, including the provision of lethal weaponry,[39] and the extent of military exercises being conducted close to Russia's borders; what he described as "provocative manoeuvres with the participation of the United States".[40]

In direct response to such actions, Lavrov said:

> In accordance with President Vladimir Putin's instructions to receive long-term trustworthy guarantees of Russia's security on the western borders, we are preparing relevant initiatives. We will continue to respond very strongly to any unfriendly steps, and we will not allow any harm to our national interests.[41]

The Kremlin has, however, denied that it is amassing forces to invade Ukraine.

Russia's Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Dmitry Polyansky, said that Russia had the right to deploy military forces anywhere in its sovereign territory.[42] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharov, has also accused Kyiv and the West of orchestrating an "hysterical campaign" and that allegations of preparations for an offensive were "simply a sidetracking manoeuvre" and a "fake excuse for the further militarisation of Ukrainian territory" as part of Kiev's efforts to undermine the Minsk Agreement.[43]

38 Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks on Russia's foreign policy priorities, 1 December 2021

39 This is examined in greater detail in Military assistance to Ukraine, House of Commons Library

40 NATO nations have conducted exercises and increased their presence in the Black Sea, including deployment of elements of the US 6th fleet in early November 2021.

41 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks on Russia's foreign policy priorities, Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 1 December 2021

42 "Western responses in support of Ukraine likely to deter Russia from renewed military incursion in one-year outlook", Jane's Intelligence Weekly (online), 16 November 2021 (accessed on 7 December 2021)

43 Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, 1 December 2021

Russian calls for security guarantees

"Russia is conducting a campaign of military intimidation with the aim of preventing any more countries joining NATO – not realising that in doing so, it is demonstrating precisely why countries want to join NATO in the first place".

Kier Giles, Chatham House, December 2021

President Putin has been very clear that Moscow views Ukraine's deepening relationship with NATO with concern, calling it a "creeping threat" to Russia's national security.[44]

Speaking at an investment forum on 30 November 2021, President Putin specifically referenced the deployment of any offensive strike capabilities within Ukraine, or Ukraine's membership of NATO as "red lines" for Russia.[45] He has called for the conclusion of legally binding security guarantees that include Ukraine's non-accession to NATO and a limit on NATO's presence in the country.[46] He has also indicated that such guarantees should also extend to Eastern European countries that have joined the Alliance since the fall of the Soviet Union.[47]

Draft agreements on security guarantees

On 17 December 2021 the Kremlin presented its proposals for legally binding security guarantees with the US and NATO, in the form of a draft treaty to the United States on security guarantees, and an agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and Member States of NATO.

Although prompted by the current situation in Ukraine, Russia's draft proposals seek to address security on a broader scale and tackle a longstanding issue at the heart of the US/NATO-Russia relationship.

President Putin has long considered that after the collapse of the Soviet Union promises were made to Russia that NATO would not expand eastwards. However, what was promised to Russia in the mid-1990s is the subject of much debate. Many Western analysts consider that no such promises were made; while others have suggested that verbal assurances were given during diplomatic talks. What is certain is that written guarantees on NATO expansion did not form part of any legally binding agreement, including the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997.[48]

President Putin raised these arguments again in his annual news conference on 23 December 2021:

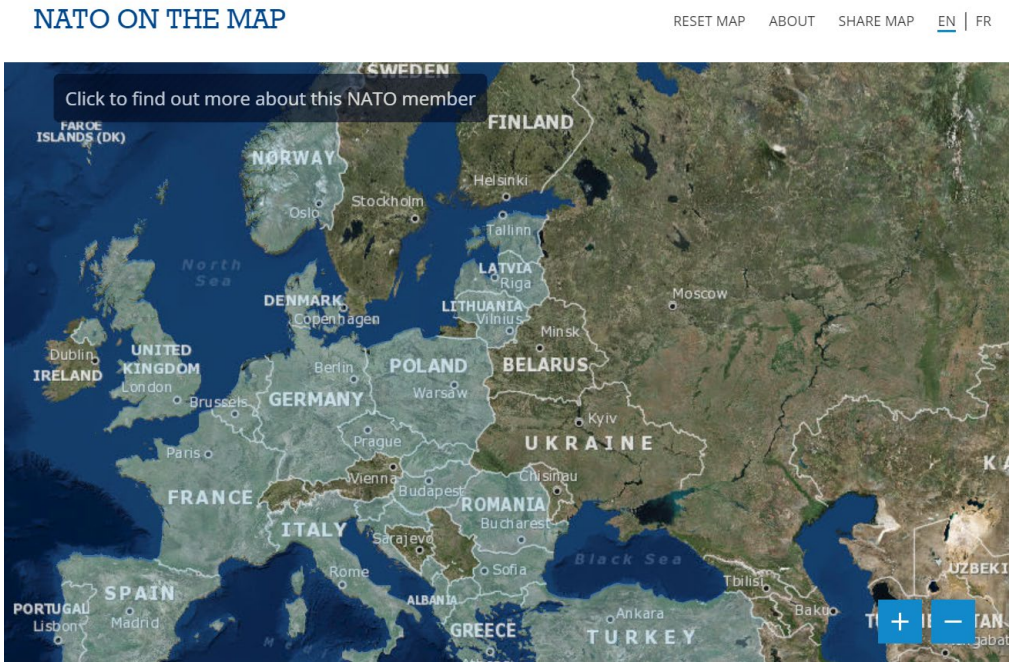
> We remember, as I have mentioned many times before and as you know very well, how you promised us in the 1990s that [NATO] would not move an inch to the East. You cheated us shamelessly: there have been five waves of NATO expansion, and now the weapons systems I mentioned have been deployed

44 "What are the 10 key areas of tension between the US and Russia?", Al Jazeera, 6 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)
45 President of Russia, Russia Calling Investment Forum, 30 November 2021
46 President of Russia, Meeting with US President Joseph Biden, 7 December 2021
47 President of Russia, Meeting with US President Joseph Biden, 7 December 2021
48 See for example John Lough in Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia, May 2021; Radio Free Europe, "Did the West promise Moscow that NATO would not expand? Well, it's complicated", 19 May 2021 and The Guardian, "Russia's belief in NATO's 'betrayal' and why it matters today", 12 January 2022

> in Romania and deployment has recently begun in Poland. This is what we are talking about, can you not see?
>
> We are not threatening anyone. Have we approached US borders? Or the borders of Britain or any other country? It is you who have come to our border, and now you say that Ukraine will become a member of NATO as well. Or, even if it does not join NATO, that military bases and strike systems will be placed on its territory under bilateral agreements. This is the point.
>
> And you are demanding guarantees from me. It is you who must give us guarantees, and you must do it immediately, right now, instead of talking about it for decades and doing what you want, while talking quietly about the need for security guarantees to everyone. This is the point.[49]

At the heart of Russia's new proposals on security guarantees, therefore, are three fundamental premises:

- That NATO will not expand any further eastward, including accepting Ukraine as a Member State.
- That US/ NATO will cease bilateral military cooperation, including the basing of military infrastructure, in countries of the former Soviet Union that are not already members of NATO, including Ukraine.



Source: NATO, NATO on the map (accessed 25 January 2022)

[49] President of Russia, Vladimir Putin's annual news conference, 23 December 2021

In an interview on 31 December 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explained Russia's rationale behind the proposals:

> This is a package of documents designed to guarantee that any further NATO advance to the East and the deployment of weapons systems near Russian borders that threaten us, especially in Ukraine, is ruled out [...]
>
> Our proposals are designed to create and legally implement a new system of agreements based on the principle of indivisible security and abandoning any attempt at achieving military superiority, which was approved unanimously by the leaders of all Euro-Atlantic states in the 1990s. Let me emphasise that what we need is legally binding guarantees since our Western colleagues have systematically failed to fulfill their political obligations, not to mention their verbal assurances and promises to the Soviet and Russian leadership.
>
> This legal foundation can be used to reach other agreements on a variety of issues in the future, including conventional arms control.[50]

Mr Lavrov has also repeatedly stated Russia's view that security commitments set out in the OSCE's Istanbul Charter and Astana Declaration in 2010, recognise that a participating state "will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States".[51]

According to the Russian news agency TASS, President Putin said the draft security agreements were not "an ultimatum" to the West, despite their portrayal in Western media.[52]

However, the presence of significant Russian military forces at Ukraine's borders has been interpreted by some as a timely reminder for the West of the potential implications of its refusal to respect Russia's red lines.[53]

Others doubt whether President Putin genuinely wants to resolve the conflict in Ukraine, preferring instead to set up a 'frozen conflict' with sporadic shows of Russian military strength.[54] The breakaway regions would be maintained and supported by Russia, thereby weakening the government in Kyiv and giving Russia strong leverage over Ukraine's actions, including any future attempts to formalise its relationship with the EU and NATO. As a recent analysis of Russian troop movements by Jane's noted:

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50 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Rossiya Segodnya, 31 December 2021

51 Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Charter for European Security, Istanbul, 1999, para.8. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Russian Federation, News conference, 21 January 2022

52 TASS, "Draft security guarantee agreements offered by Russia are not ultimatum, Putin says", 21 December 2021

53 "War in Ukraine grinds on as US considers sending arms", The Times (online), 24 November 2021 (accessed on 8 December 2021)

54 This is also a tactic that Russia has employed elsewhere in its near abroad. See Cool conflicts in Russia's neighbourhood, House of Commons Library, January 2019

Russia has demonstrated its willingness to leave large quantities of equipment out of position for several months over Ukraine and may choose to do the same now, meaning this pressure on Kyiv can essentially become the new normal.[55]

[55] "Russia builds up forces on Ukrainian border", Jane's Defence Weekly, 9 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

3 International response

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 the West has been unanimous in its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and, as a result, several countries have provided military assistance to the country's armed forces.[56]

In response to the latest build-up of Russian forces, Western commitments to Ukrainian sovereignty have been reiterated. Western nations, including the UK, have collectively called on Russia to de-escalate and pursue diplomacy, including full implementation of the Minsk agreements. They have also made clear that there will be severe costs imposed on Russia if it invades Ukraine.

In immediate response to the latest build-up of forces, the NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, called for dialogue, and for Russia to be transparent about its intentions.[57] In a tweet on 1 December 2021 he said:

> [NATO Foreign] Ministers made clear that any further Russian aggression against Ukraine will have serious political & economic consequences. We need to remain vigilant & avoid escalation.[58]

NATO also firmly rejected "the false Russian claims of Ukrainian and NATO provocations".[59]

European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, confirmed the EU's support for Ukraine and that it would respond to any further Russian aggression "by scaling up and expanding existing sanctions", in coordination with partners.[60]

President Biden also made clear that the US will not operate according to "anyone's red lines" and that, in line with the OSCE Helsinki Final Act and the 1999 Istanbul Charter, to which Russia is a party, "every country has the sovereign right to make its own decisions with respect to its security".[61]

Indeed, in response to President Putin's "red lines", the Ukrainian government set out one of its own:

56 This is examined in House of Commons Library, Military assistance to Ukraine

57 Remarks by the NATO Secretary General in a panel discussion at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Symposium, 8 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

58 Jens Stoltenberg, Twitter, 1 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

59 NATO press release, 16 December 2021 and NATO - NATO-Russia: setting the record straight

60 Ursula von der Leyen, Twitter, 7 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

61 White House, Background press call by senior Administration officials, 6 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

> Ukraine is a sovereign state and it is our business how we build our relations both with NATO, EU or individual states.[62]

3.1 Diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation

"This is about one of the foundational principles of the international order, and that is that no country, however large, however powerful, however much military might, whether a country has nuclear weapons or not, no country has the right to dictate borders, to bully smaller countries, to intimidate, to coerce, to pursue their own interests".

Ned Price, US State Department Spokesman, 20 December 2021

Following on from talks with President Putin on 7 December 2021, President Biden indicated his intention to convene talks between Russia and NATO allies "to discuss the future of Russia's concerns relative to NATO writ large".[63]

A White House briefing later sought to clarify that the US supports discussions between NATO and Russia "to address larger issues of concern on both sides – Russia's concerns with NATO activities, and NATO and American concerns with Russian activities". The briefing went on to note the dialogue that has previously existed through the NATO-Russia Council[64] and the OSCE, suggesting that "there's no reason we can't do that going forward".[65]

The US approach has since been described as the pursuit of both deterrence and diplomacy.[66] On 28 December 2021, a US State Department Spokesman said:

> We are unified as an Alliance on the consequences Russia would face if it moves on Ukraine. But we are also unified in our willingness to engage in principled diplomacy with Russia.[67]

The move toward more formal talks was viewed by some as a diplomatic concession to Russia. One senior official was reported to have commented that "under no circumstances should the debate on guarantees in the context of European security be allowed to unfold".[68]

While supporting "meaningful dialogue" with Russia,[69] NATO also made it clear that discussions must proceed on the basis of reciprocity and address NATO's concerns over Russian actions.[70] The NATO Secretary General also reiterated that "it's only the 30 Allies and Ukraine that has the right to decide

62 "Biden reaffirms US unwavering commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty", The Financial Times (online), 10 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)
63 White House, Remarks by President Biden before Marine One Departure, 8 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)
64 The NATO-Russia Council has been the primary mechanism through which dialogue has taken place since 2002. Practical cooperation under the remit of the NRC was suspended in 2014, although channels of communication were kept open. In October 2021 Russia also suspended its diplomatic mission to NATO.
65 White House, Press briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, 7 December 2021 (accessed on 8 December 2021)
66 US Department of State press briefing, 28 December 2021
67 US Department of State press briefing, 28 December 2021
68 "Joe Biden makes diplomatic concession to Russia with NATO talks plan", The Financial Times (online), 8 December 2021 (accessed 9 December 2021)
69 NATO press release, 16 December 2021 (accessed 7 January 2022)
70 NATO press release, 16 December 2021 (accessed 7 January 2022)

when Ukraine meets the standards to become a NATO Ally" and that NATO has to be "very clear on these principles".[71]

Further talks between Presidents Biden and Putin took place at the end of December 2021. President Biden urged Russia to de-escalate tensions, while making clear that the US and its allies would respond "decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine". He expressed his support for forthcoming diplomatic talks but reiterated that substantive progress could only be achieved in "an environment of de-escalation rather than escalation".[72]

President Putin highlighted the need for discussions to "produce solid legally binding guarantees ruling out NATO's eastward expansion and the deployment of weapons that threaten Russia in the immediate vicinity of its borders". He also warned against the imposition of sanctions suggesting it would be a "grave error" and would lead to the "danger of a complete breakdown in Russia-US relations".[73]

The outcome of security talks – January 2022

A series of meetings between the US, NATO, OSCE and Russia took place in mid-January 2022.

Going into the talks all sides expressed reservations about what they may achieve.[74] Russia's proposals for legal security guarantees were widely considered to be unrealistic, while several analysts also expressed concern that Russia intended for the proposals to fail as a pretext for military action against Ukraine.[75]

The US and NATO allies also made clear that no discussion or decisions would be taken on Ukraine without close consultation with Kyiv.[76]

US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue

On 9-10 January 2022, US and Russian officials held strategic stability talks in Geneva.[77] The focus of the talks was primarily on bilateral matters, including future arms control and confidence building measures. On the issue of

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71 Remarks by the NATO Secretary General in a panel discussion at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Symposium, 8 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

72 White House, Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on President Biden's phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia, 30 December 2021

73 President of Russia, Telephone conversation with US President Joseph Biden, 30 December 2021

74 This is examined in greater detail in House of Commons Library, European security: the outcome of talks with Russia

75 See Steven Pifer, "Russia's draft agreement with NATO and the United States intended for rejection?", Brookings Institute, 21 December 2021 and Dr Patricia Lewis, "Russian treaty proposals hark back to post-Cold War era", Chatham House Expert Commentary, 19 December 2021

76 White House, Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on President Biden's call with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine, 2 January 2022

77 The bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) was re-established by the US and Russia in 2021, primarily as a forum to discuss nuclear arms control and risk reduction. The last round of strategic stability talks was held in September 2021.

Ukraine, the US once again called for Russia to de-escalate and warned that any invasion of Ukraine would be met with "significant costs and consequences well beyond what they faced in 2014".[78] In response, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, dismissed concerns that Russia intended to invade Ukraine, reiterating that military forces were deployed on military exercises on Russian territory and that there was "no reason to fear any escalation scenario in this regard".[79]

NATO-Russia Council (NRC)

On 12 January 2022 the NATO-Russia Council met, for the first time in two years.[80] The meeting focused primarily on Russia's proposals for legally binding security guarantees in Europe and its near abroad, including Ukraine's relationship with NATO. Russia did not commit to de-escalation at the Ukrainian border.

Responding to Russia's demands, NATO allies "reaffirmed NATO's open-door policy and the right of each nation to choose its own security arrangements". On the issue of Ukrainian membership of the Alliance, the NATO Secretary General reiterated that "it is only Ukraine and 30 Allies that can decide when Ukraine is ready to become a NATO member [...] Russia doesn't have a veto on whether Ukraine can become a NATO member". He went on to state that allies are "ready to support Ukraine on this path towards membership, helping to implement reforms, modernise the armed forces to meet NATO standards".[81] He also made clear that NATO's article V security guarantee[82] only applies to NATO Member States and not partner countries, such as Ukraine.[83]

While the alliance said that it will not compromise on its core principles, it proposed further dialogue with Russia on a series of proposals including confidence building measures and limits on missile deployments in Europe.[84] Russia did not commit to future talks, although officials did not outrightly reject them either, indicating that they would need time before coming back to NATO with an answer.[85]

78 US State Department, Briefing with Deputy Secretary Wendy R. Sherman on the US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue, 10 January 2022

79 Euractiv, "US, Russia make no breakthrough or concessions in security talks, commit to keep talking", 11 January 2022

80 The NRC last met in July 2019 to discuss Ukraine and the then potential collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

81 NATO, Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, 12 January 2022

82 NATO's mutual defence clause which states that an attack on one NATO member state is considered an attack on them all and will trigger a response from the whole alliance.

83 NATO, Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, 12 January 2022

84 NATO, Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, 12 January 2022

85 NATO, Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, 12 January 2022

On 18 January 2022 the NATO Secretary General issued a formal invitation to all members of the NRC to participate in a series of meetings to discuss NATO's security proposals.[86]

OSCE Permanent Council

The OSCE Helsinki Act 1975, to which both Russia and Ukraine are party, sets out several fundamental principles of security: the inviolability of internationally recognised borders and the right of sovereign countries to determine with whom they associate. The OSCE is a member of the Trilateral Contact Group for Ukraine which works towards implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

The OSCE Permanent Council met on 13 January 2022 in a pre-planned session and irrespective of the situation in Ukraine.[87] At the meeting Polish Foreign Minister, Zbigniew Rau, was officially inaugurated as the OSCE Chairman and he set out Poland's priorities for the coming year. Ukraine was also on the agenda.

In his address to the Permanent Council the Chairman called for the debate on European security to be "reinvigorated" and for the start of a process that "will help us to uphold the Helsinki principles in full conformity with international law".[88] No specific measures were proposed.

Western allies welcomed the proposal to use the OSCE as a forum for revitalised European security talks. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, dismissed the discussions within the OSCE, however, stating that Russia had not "initiated talks in the OSCE" and that while the Russian representative to the OSCE would mention "the [security] initiatives we are discussing now… the main format is Russia-US and Russia-NATO".[89]

Further US-Russia talks

On 21 January 2022 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, met in Geneva for a further round of talks.

While not expecting any breakthroughs, the US administration said it wanted to test whether there was still "a path forward for diplomacy and dialogue".[90] In his opening remarks Mr Lavrov stated:

> We are not expecting a breakthrough from this meeting either. What we are expecting are replies to our proposals. They are utterly concrete. We expect

86 NATO, Press statement, 18 January 2022

87 The OSCE Permanent Council is the principal decision-making body for regular political consultations and for governing the day-to-day operational work of the OSCE between the meetings of the Ministerial Council. It meets on a regular basis.

88 OSCE Chairmanship, Press release, 13 January 2022

89 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Channel One, 13 January 2022

90 US State Department, Secretary Blinken with George Stephanopoulos of ABC's Good Morning America, 21 January 2022

> equally concrete replies, in line and in full conformity with the commitments assumed at the top level within the OSCE with regard to the indivisibility of security. These commitments state that no country should strengthen its security at the expense of any other country's security.
>
> It would be interesting to hear how the United States interprets these commitments.[91]

Secretary Blinken called the talks "a candid exchange of concerns and ideas", reiterating that while the US and its allies were "united in our commitment to finding a way forward through diplomacy and dialogue" they were equally resolved to "to impose massive consequences should Russia choose the path of confrontation and conflict". Blinken confirmed that a decisive response would also meet any Russian aggression that fell short of military action, including "cyber attacks and paramilitary tactics".[92]

He confirmed that, following consultations with allies and partners, the US would present Russia with its concerns and ideas in writing, with a view to further discussions after that.[93]

In the meantime, he said that the US and its allies "will continue to prepare resolutely to both paths that we've laid out for Russia".[94]

US and NATO responses to Russian security proposals

The US and NATO presented co-ordinated written responses to Russia's draft security proposals on 26 January 2022.

Neither the US nor NATO have made the documents publicly available on the basis that "diplomacy has the best chance to succeed if we provide space for confidential talks".[95] US and NATO officials have, however, provided extensive briefing on the document's main proposals.[96]

In a press briefing on 26 January US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken said:

> The document we've delivered includes concerns of the United States and our allies and partners about Russia's actions that undermine security, a principled and pragmatic evaluation of the concerns that Russia has raised, and our own proposals for areas where we may be able to find common ground.[97]

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91 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks during talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, 21 January 2022

92 US State Department, Secretary Blinken at a press availability, 21 January 2022

93 US State Department, Secretary Blinken at a press availability, 21 January 2022

94 US State Department, Secretary Blinken at a press availability, 21 January 2022

95 US State Department, Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability, 26 January 2022

96 For more detail, see US State Department, Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability, 26 January 2022 and NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, 26 January 2022

97 US State Department, Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability, 26 January 2022

Those proposals largely reflect the ideas on communications, confidence building and arms control that were put forward in the aftermath of security talks in mid-January (see above).

Both documents continue to make clear that neither the US nor NATO will compromise on key principles of security, including the inviolability of international recognised borders and the right of states to choose their own alliances.

On the issue of Ukraine, Secretary Blinken said the document "addressed the possibility of reciprocal transparency measures regarding force posture" in the country, as well as measures to increase confidence regarding military exercises and manouevres in Europe.[98]

He said the US was "open to dialogue" and preferred diplomacy, calling on Russia to de-escalate, stop the "inflammatory rhetoric", and approach a discussion about future European security in "a spirit of reciprocity".[99]

In response, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said that the responses offered "grounds for serious talks only on matters of secondary importance" and that there was no positive response on Russia's main concerns. He confirmed that the documents would now be considered across Government before conclusions are submitted to President Putin who will then decide on next steps.[100] He did not give a timeframe for doing so. Nor did he indicate whether Russia will accept NATO's invitation for future rounds of security talks within the NATO-Russia Council, or make any efforts toward de-escalation at the Ukrainian border.[101]

In the meantime, Mr Lavrov indicated that a formal request would be made to OSCE participating states seeking clarification of their positions on the security principles set out in the Istanbul Charter 1999 [PDF] and the Astana Declaration 2010 [PDF].[102] As outlined above, Mr Lavrov has, on several occasions, accused the West of focusing their arguments, with respect to Ukraine, on the right of states to choose their own security arrangements, while at the same time ignoring the equally established principle that no state should strengthen its security at the expense of others. These principles, he argued, have been "reaffirmed within the OSCE framework several times, including at the top level" and that Russia would now seek "clarity regarding this hypocritical position of our Western partners".[103]

In an interview with Russia's Channel One on 30 January, Mr Lavrov suggested that the nature of the response received would "be the key factor for

98 US State Department, Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability, 26 January 2022
99 US State Department, Secretary Antony Blinken at a press availability, 26 January 2022
100 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answer to a media question, 27 January 2022
101 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, News conference, 21 January 2022
102 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, News conference, 21 January 2022
103 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, News conference, 21 January 2022

determining our future proposals about which we will report to President Vladimir Putin".[104]

Meeting of the Normandy Format

In efforts to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine, in 2014 the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine met for talks in Normandy.

Referred to as the Normandy Format, the talks eventually led to the conclusion of the Minsk Agreements (see above), which remain the basis for the negotiation of a political solution to the conflict. The Normandy Format last met in 2019, although little progress was made.

Amid current Russian/Ukraine tensions, official representatives of the Normandy Format countries convened on 26 January 2022 to try and find a way forward for the peace process.

All parties reaffirmed the Minsk agreements as the basis for the work of the Normandy Format and stated their commitment to "reduce current disagreements on the way forward".[105]

President Zelenskyy welcomed the resumption of talks and said achieving a "stable and unconditional" ceasefire in Donbas was the first priority and the basis on which next steps could be taken.[106] The Ukrainian representative at the talks made clear that any de-escalation should also apply to the situation around Ukraine's borders.[107]

The Kremlin called for NATO countries to "stop fuelling the conflict in eastern Ukraine and abstain from interfering in the domestic affairs of that country". Kremlin spokesman, Alexey Zaitsev, said that Ukraine should "finally show independence" and find a sustainable political solution to the current conflict in direct dialogue with Donetsk and Luhansk.[108]

Subsequent talks were held on 10 February in Berlin, although no progress was made. All parties reportedly reaffirmed their willingness to continue negotiations within the Normandy Format, although no timetable for future rounds of talks was established.[109]

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104 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answers to questions from Channel One's Voskresnoye Vremya programme, 30 January 2022

105 Office of the French President, Declaration of the advisers to the N4 Heads of States and Governments, 26 January 2022

106 President of Ukraine, Press release, 27 January 2022

107 President of Ukraine, Press release, 26 January 2022

108 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Briefing by Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department, Alexey Zaitsev, 27 January 2022

109 President of Ukraine, Press release, 11 February 2022

3.2 What happens next?

Diplomacy continues with several world leaders having visited Moscow for talks in recent weeks.

In his first public comments on the Ukraine crisis since December 2021, President Putin said on 1 February 2022 that the US was trying to draw Russia into a war over Ukraine as a pretext for imposing further sanctions. Following talks with the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, President Putin also said that the US and NATO had ignored Russia's principal security concerns, but that he remained open to dialogue.[110]

In mid-February the Russian Ministry of Defence said that several units had begun to withdraw from the region back to their permanent locations, having completed their exercises.[111]

Russian claims of a drawdown of forces have, however, been met with scepticism. On 16 February 2022 the NATO Secretary General said the alliance had not seen any signs of de-escalation on the ground, thus far;[112] while US officials suggested that Russia had in fact deployed 7,000 additional troops to the Ukrainian border region in the last few days.[113] White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, suggested that Russian claims of a withdrawal should be taken at "face value".[114]

In the meantime, shelling between pro-Russian separatist forces and Ukrainian government forces in eastern Ukraine has increased. The US has also warned of an increase in Russian claims of provocations in eastern Ukraine, which could form the pretext of an invasion. At a press briefing on 16 February, Jen Psaki noted:

> We continue to receive indications that they could launch a false pretext at any moment to justify an invasion of Ukraine. That false pretext could take a number of different forms: a provocation in the Donbas; a claim about NATO activity by land, at sea, or in the air; an incursion into Russian territory.
>
> We have already seen an increase in false claims by the Russians in the past few days, including reports of an unmarked grave of civilians allegedly killed by the Ukrainian armed forces, statements that the U.S. and Ukraine are developing biological or chemical weapons, and that the West is funneling in guerrillas to kill locals. Each of these allegations is categorically false, and we

110 The New York Times, "Russia says the US wants to push Russia into war", 2 February 2022. A full transcript of the press conference, in English, will be made available at President of Russia, News conference following Russian-Hungarian talks, 1 February 2022

111 Russian Ministry of Defence, Press release, 15 February 2022

112 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General, 16 February 2022

113 White House, Background press call, 16 February 2022

114 White House, Background press call, 16 February 2022

should expect more false reports from Russian state media over the coming days.[115]

At the time of writing, it is unclear whether the Kremlin will agree to NATO's proposal for more substantive security talks in the longer term. A Russian response to the US's counter proposals was received by the US administration on 17 February and is currently being considered.[116]

On 14 February 2022, however, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said "I think our opportunities are far from exhausted. Of course, they should not be endless, but I think we should still continue to pursue and build on them at this point".[117]

3.3 Deterrence as well as diplomacy

Western nations have stated that the onus is on Russia to de-escalate and engage in meaningful diplomacy.

However, in keeping with their dual track approach to Russia, emphasis is now being given to deterrence, as well as diplomacy.

For several months, the West, including the US, the UK, the EU and NATO allies, have been collectively discussing a series of possible punitive measures, in the event that Russia invades Ukraine.

Bolstering NATO's presence in Eastern Europe

Since 2014, and in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, NATO has implemented a series of measures to strengthen the collective defence of the Alliance and provide reassurance to the Member States that border Russia.

Among the most significant is the deployment of "robust and combat-ready" forces in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, collectively referred to as NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (PDF).[118]

115 White House, Background press call, 16 February 2022

116 US State Department, Secretary Antony J. Blinken on Russia's threat to peace and security at the UN Security Council, 17 February 2022

117 President of Russia, Meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, 14 February 2022

118 NATO, Boosting NATO's presence in the East and Southeast, January 2022 Boosting NATO's presence in the East and Southeast,



Source: NATO, January 2022

Bolstering NATO's forward presence, in the event of military aggression toward Ukraine, has been under discussion.[119] On 7 December 2021 NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), visited Estonia and said: "NATO stands ready to defend each and every ally".[120]

Following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council on 12 January 2022, the NATO Secretary General said that in the event of any Russian use of force against Ukraine, the alliance would "have to seriously look into the need to further increase our presence in the eastern part of the Alliance".[121]

However, initial moves to reinforce "allied deterrence" were announced on 24 January 2022, including the deployment of additional fighter aircraft and naval assets to Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in the region. NATO forces have also been placed on standby.[122]

On 16 February 2022 the NATO Secretary General confirmed that further consideration is also being given to the deployment of additional battlegroups in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe.[123]

NATO combat forces will not, however, be deployed to Ukraine, which is a "strong and highly valued" partner country of the alliance and not party to NATO's Article V mutual defence clause.[124]

119 White House, Press briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, 7 December 2021

120 "SACEUR stresses deterrence and defence in Estonia", SHAPE press release, 8 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

121 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, 12 January 2022

122 NATO, press release, 24 January 2022

123 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General, 16 February 2022

124 BBC Sunday Morning, Interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, 30 January 2022

The reinforcement of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence is examined in greater detail in:

- House of Commons Library, NATO: Reinforcing its eastern flank, February 2022

Additional military assistance to Ukraine

Since Ukrainian independence in 1991 security cooperation with Western allies has been a key feature of bilateral and multilateral relations. With aspirations to join both the EU and NATO, initial military assistance to Ukraine was largely focused on defence reform, defence planning and capacity building.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and at the request of the Ukrainian Government, allies significantly stepped up their support. While much of that support has been focused on non-lethal capacity building and training, in 2018 and in contrast to its other NATO allies at the time, the US began providing Ukraine with lethal weaponry.

In response to the most recent build-up of Russian forces along Ukraine's borders, Western allies have provided additional defensive capabilities to Ukraine, above and beyond what was already being provided. For the first time, several allies including the UK and the Baltic countries announced that they would supply lethal defensive weaponry to Ukraine.

This assistance is examined in greater detail in:

- House of Commons Library, Military assistance to Ukraine, February 2022

Economic sanctions

Western governments have been collectively discussing a package of economic and financial sanctions that could potentially target Russian debt and banking transactions, Russia's energy sector and, significantly, Nord Stream 2 (NS2). Export controls on sensitive technologies have also been touted as an option, along with the imposition of personal sanctions against President Putin.[125]

[125] US Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability, 26 January 2022

International banking – potential removal from SWIFT

Expelling Russia from the SWIFT international banking system has been considered the ultimate sanction, and one described by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, as a "very potent weapon". While it is one of the stronger measures under consideration, there is some doubt, however, as to its potential effect.[126]

2 International banking – what is SWIFT?

In 1973, 239 banks from 15 countries got together to build a system to make cross-border payments easier. The product, launched in 1977, was the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT).

SWIFT does not actually handle money. Instead, it operates a communications network. Each bank has its own unique SWIFT code.

The system makes cross-border payments faster and allows for trust to be built up between banks through the use of a neutral, global communications network. Today, SWIFT is the main network used globally for cross-border bank payments. It is used in over 200 countries by over 11,000 financial institutions.

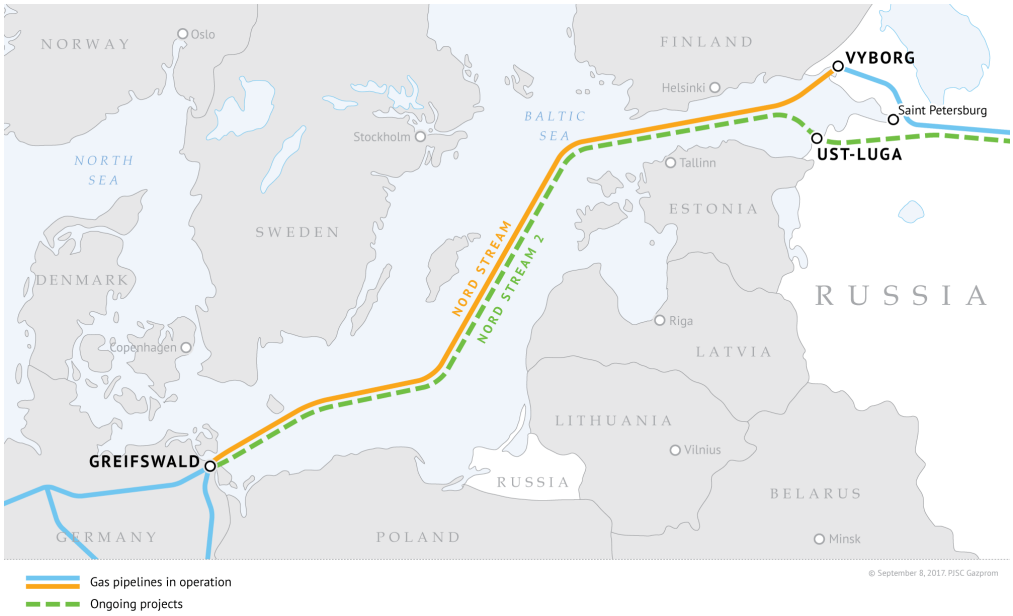
[126] See for example, Financial Times, "Shutting out Russia from SWIFT would not be a surgical strike", 31 January 2022; Atlantic Council, "Cutting off Russia from SWIFT will really sting", 12 January 2022 and Carnegie Moscow Center, "How disastrous would disconnection from SWIFT be for Russia?", 28 May 2021

As SWIFT is headquartered in Belgium and owned by its member institutions, it is also under the jurisdiction of Belgian and EU law. No one country can unilaterally decide to exclude any country from the SWIFT network. This would require coordination with the EU to impose such sanctions and/or agreement from enough of SWIFT's members, including the US.

There is a precedent, however. Iranian banks were removed from SWIFT in 2012 after being sanctioned by the EU. Iran subsequently reportedly lost almost half of its oil export revenue and 30% of its foreign trade.[127] But as Iran was already under heavy sanctions at the time, the removal appeared "more damaging than it really was".[128]

A halt to Nord Stream 2?

The new Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline connects Russia to Germany, bypassing Ukraine which is currently a major transit country for Russian gas exports into Europe.[129]



Source: Gazprom

In recent months, President Putin has been accused of weaponising Russian gas supplies to Europe in order to get the pipeline approved by EU regulators.[130]

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127 CNN, What is SWIFT and why it might be the weapon Russia fears most? 27 January 2022

128 Financial Times, Shutting out Russia from Swift system would not be a surgical strike, 31 January 2022

129 Transit fees are thought to account for almost 3% of Ukraine's GDP. Ukraine expects gas transit revenue of $2-3 billion annually over the next five years, after a transit deal was reached in December 2020 between Russia and Ukraine.

130 See "The Nord Stream 2 pipeline", European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2021

In July 2021, and in response to ongoing US concerns over the geopolitical implications of NS2, the US and Germany reached an agreement regarding the pipeline to "prevent it being used as a weapon". In a Joint Statement they said:

> Should Russia attempt to use energy as a weapon or commit further aggressive acts against Ukraine, Germany will take action at the national level and press for effective measures at the European level, including sanctions, to limit Russian export capabilities to Europe in the energy sector, including gas, and/or in other economically relevant sectors. This commitment is designed to ensure that Russia will not misuse any pipeline, including Nord Stream 2, to achieve aggressive political ends by using energy as a weapon.[131]

Allies are pushing for the pipeline to be halted as part of any broader sanctions package.[132] Initially it was unclear whether the new German coalition Government, led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, would support such a move.

Germany has long argued that the project is a private economic enterprise with no political connotations and several senior figures in the new government, including Chancellor Scholz and the German defence minister, Christine Lambrecht, initially defended NS2, arguing that it was a commercial project and should not be linked to current Russian-Ukrainian tensions.[133]

In recent weeks however, and under pressure from allies, the Government appears to have shifted position. In a Twitter post on 26 January 2022 the German Ambassador to the US, Emily Haber, confirmed:

> The US and Germany jointly declared last summer: if Russia uses energy as a weapon or if there is another violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, Russia will have to pay a high price.
>
> @OlafScholz and @ABaerbock stated clearly: nothing will be off the table, including Nord Stream 2.[134]

On 27 January US Under Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, unequivocally stated that "If Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another, Nord Stream 2 will not move forward".[135]

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131 US Department of State, Joint Statement of the United States and Germany on support for Ukraine, European energy security and our climate goals, 21 July 2021

132 "Germany eyes Nord Stream 2 sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine", The Financial Times (online), 9 December 2021

133 See The Financial Ties, "Germany's Russia problem: Ukraine crisis tests new Government", 31 January 2022 and Politico, "Russian test for Scholz: Ukraine crisis exposes divisions in Berlin", 17 January 2022

134 Twitter, German Ambassador to the United States, 26 January 2022

135 US Department of State, Department Press Briefing, 27 January 2022

The US State Department also confirmed that the US was working with the EU and several allies and partners globally, to secure European energy supplies should Russia cut off gas exports to the EU in retaliation for sanctions.[136]

Nord Stream 2 is examined in greater detail in:

- House of Commons Library, Geopolitical implications of Nord Stream 2, February 2022

3.4 What is the UK Government's position on Ukraine?

Following a meeting with her Ukrainian counterpart on 8 December 2021, the Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, reiterated the UK's commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and called on Russia to "de-escalate tensions and abide by its international commitments including reporting troop movements and returning to the table for serious talks". She stated that "a Russian incursion would be a strategic mistake and subject to consequences".[137] Any response would be coordinated with partners.

A Joint Communiqué issued after the Foreign Secretary's meeting confirmed that the UK and Ukraine will continue to work together "to strengthen Ukraine's security" and the "potential for additional UK support" would be explored.[138]

This position was reiterated by the Government in a statement to the House on 6 January 2022. The Foreign Secretary once again called on Russia to end its "malign activity" and abide by its international commitments, including the Helsinki Final Act, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 2014 Minsk Agreements, stating that "any Russian military incursion into Ukraine would be a massive strategic mistake and would come at a severe cost".[139]

The Government has made clear that it is open to continuing dialogue with Russia on a bilateral basis.[140]

Military assistance

The Defence Secretary confirmed on 17 January that UK military assistance to Ukraine would be expanded in "light of the increasingly threatening behaviour

136 US Department of State, Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability, 26 January 2022 and European Commission, Joint Statement by President von der Leyen and President Biden on US-EU cooperation on energy security, 28 January 2022

137 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Press Release, 8 December 2021

138 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK-Ukraine Strategic Dialogue: Joint Communiqué, 8 December 2021

139 HC Deb 6 January 2022, c170

140 HC Deb 17 January 2022, c62

from Russia".[141] In addition to the current support provided to the Ukrainian armed forces, a new package of security assistance would be provided for defensive purposes, including for the first time, anti-armour weapon systems. The Defence Secretary made clear that "Ukraine has every right to defend its borders, and this new package of aid further enhances its ability to do so".[142]

Sanction's legislation

As part of deterrence measures, on 31 January 2022 the Foreign Secretary confirmed that the Government would introduce legislation enabling "an unprecedented package of coordinated sanctions", should Russia invade Ukraine.[143]

The current economic sanctions regime is aimed "at encouraging Russia to cease actions destabilising Ukraine or undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of Ukraine". As such, sanctions can only be imposed on companies and individuals with a direct involvement in the destabilisation of Ukraine.

Under new measures, and in the event of any Russian invasion or incursion into Ukraine, the UK would be able to target the strategic interests of the Russian state more broadly, including Russian banks, the energy sector, and oligarchs who have close ties to the Kremlin. The Foreign Secretary stated:

> We will be able to target any company that is linked to the Russian state, engages in business of economic significance to the Russian state, or operates in a sector of strategic significance to the Russian state. Not only will we be able to target these entities, we will also be able to go after those who own or control them. This will be the toughest sanctions regime against Russia we have ever had, and it is the most radical departure in approach since leaving the European Union. Those in and around the Kremlin will have nowhere to hide.[144]

The Government did not confirm who may be targeted, or with what measures, but said that it would "use these new powers to maximum effect if it pursues its aggressive intent towards Ukraine", that sanctions would be applied "without fear or favour" and that "nothing is off the table".[145]

141 HC Deb 17 January 2022, c62
142 HC Deb 17 January 2022, c62
143 HC Deb 31 January 2022, c55
144 HC Deb 31 January 2022, c56
145 HC Deb 31 January 2022, c56 and c58

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