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THE CURRENT: Will Russia launch a full military invasion of Ukraine?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

In recent weeks, U.S. intelligence reports have shown increased Russian troop movements toward its border with Ukraine, a buildup that has provoked fears of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, potentially early next year. Since Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula in 2014, the slow-burning conflict has displaced over two million people and killed more 14,000.

Here with an update on what's happening in Ukraine and whether there's a diplomatic off-ramp to stave off further military escalation is Steven Pifer, a nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings and the William J. Perry fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. Steve, thanks so much for talking to us today.

PIFER: Happy to do it.

PITA: Since Russia annexed Crimea back in 2014 there was a 2015 agreement that put a lid on a lot of the large-scale fighting, although it has continued to continue to smolder since then. Maybe you could catch us up on what's been happening in eastern Ukraine for the past six years. I think for a lot of the general public, once the threat of larger-scale war wasn't imminent anymore, I think it dropped off a lot of people's radars. So, how did we get to where we are now?

PIFER: Sure, back in 2015, the Germans and the French brokered in agreement called Minsk II between the Ukrainians and the Russians. And it was intended to resolve the conflict in Donbass, but unfortunately, it's never been implemented. And not even the first three provisions, which were about a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons from the line of contact, and then access for monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to ensure that the sides were abiding by the first two commitments. And so absent that, the basic ceasefire, the sides really have not gotten into the later political provisions of the agreement.

And, to my mind, it appears that Moscow has wanted to sustain this simmering conflict. It uses this conflict as a means to put pressure on Ukraine, to distract it, to make it harder for the government in Kyiv to do what it needs to do to basically improve its economy and complete the needed reforms.

Now what's happened in the last five, six weeks, you've seen intelligence concerns and a great deal of alarm expressed both in Washington, but also in European capitals – Berlin, Paris, London, at NATO headquarters – about this Russian troop buildup near Ukraine. It's somewhat of a repetition of what we saw in April, where nothing happened, but this seems to be more serious in terms of the way

Western officials are talking about it. The U.S. government thinks that there may be as many as, a plan to have up to 175,000 Russian troops near Ukraine and some of these forces reportedly come from as far away as 4000 kilometers in Siberia.

So there is a great deal of concern now. I look at it, and I think that at the end of the day, the costs of Russia launching a major military incursion or a new major military incursion in Ukraine are substantial and should dissuade them from doing that. But let me be the first person to admit that I've not always been the best predictor of the logic by which Vladimir Putin operates. So I don't know what Mr. Putin is going to do, and it may well be that Mr. Putin himself has not decided. Ideally, from the point of view of the Kremlin, there would be concessions from Kyiv and the West with just the threat of Russian military force. But I don't know what he's going to do, and therefore I think the West should assume the worst, and should be doing everything it can now to deter Russia from launching a major military attack, to dissuade Moscow, and to make clear that the cost of that kind of action would be very significant for Russia.

PITA: On the point of Mr. Putin's logic, is there any understanding about why Russia is choosing to escalate now? What are some of the security concerns that that they've been raising?

PIFER: Well, there's lots of speculation. One concern that people say is that Mr. Putin has now become concerned that Russia may be losing Ukraine irretrievably. And, quite frankly, if you look at how attitudes in Ukraine have evolved over the last several years, yes, Ukrainians, at larger and larger numbers, they want to be associated to the West, they want to be in institutions such as the European Union, and even in NATO. And that's a direct result of Russian policy. The Russian seizure of Crimea, the biggest land grab in Europe since World War Two, and then Russia's sustainment of this conflict in Donbass, which has claimed over 13,000 lives, that's had the effect of pushing Ukraine away from Russia and more towards the West. That concerns Mr. Putin, but I'm not sure the Kremlin understands that this has been the result of a strategic failure, of bad policy decisions by the Kremlin, and I don't see that using military force now against Ukraine is going to change that. That seems to be the Kremlin doubling down on a bad decision.

PITA: So, of course, the big question – and as you say, it's very difficult to tell, especially since we don't know if Putin himself has decided what to do yet – but where do you fall on the, whether this is more of a bluff, whether this is posturing to gain concessions, or about whether this might actually be an invasion that Putin would go through with?

PIFER: By my logic I tend to think that this is more towards bluff than an actual intention for a real invasion. Again, because I calculate the cost is significant for Moscow, but I would repeat that Mr. Putin has his own logic and certainly when I've talked to people in the U.S. government, the degree of alarm that they've expressed is notable. And again the fact that you have European officials now speaking out, much more concerned about what's happening now than they were by the Russian buildup back in April, obviously we don't know the full intelligence that's available to the United States and to NATO members, but it seems to have alarmed them in a way that suggests that they think that there's a significant possibility that the Russians may use military force. And part of it is because it looks like the Russians are building the pieces, so that they have that option.

Now again from the Kremlin's point of view, simply the assembly of that force, the massing of those troops, if that achieves political aims, that's all to the good. But I'm not sure they're going to achieve those political goals, and then the question becomes, what does Mr. Putin do?

PITA: President Biden spoke with Putin last week; we also saw Wednesday afternoon this week Ukrainian President Zelensky met with French and German leaders in Brussels. What sort of response are we seeing so far from the U.S. and European counterparts?

PIFER: From the readout that the White House gave, President Biden did what I thought he needed to do in that call: was he sketched out very clearly for the Russians, these are the costs that the West will impose, and those costs include additional economic sanctions. And both in the United States, in Washington, but also in Europe, they're talking about sanctions that go significantly beyond what the West has imposed in terms of sanctions on Russia to date. And they suggest that there will be significant economic pain.

A second response that the president apparently talked to Mr. Putin about was that if there were a Russian military incursion, there would be a greater flow of Western military assistance, not including NATO combat troops, but equipment and weapons that would allow the Ukrainians to better defend themselves.

And then the third thing that President Biden suggested was that, look, if the Russians launch a major military operation in Ukraine, you will have concerned allies in the Baltic states, in Poland, elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe and they will want to have more NATO presence on their territory. And certainly the White House has indicated that, if there were a Russian assault on Ukraine, that the United States would be prepared to consider those requests favorably, and that's something the Russians do not like.

But the big cost here is not going to be one that's imposed by the West; it's going to be imposed by Ukraine. The Ukrainian military today is twice the size that it was in 2014. In 2014, the Ukrainians had about 6000 combat troops that were considered ready to deploy. Today, the Ukrainian military has tens of thousands of troops that have actually served on the line of contact. And again, I don't believe the Ukrainian military at the end of the day beats the Russian military, but they will extract a price. Moreover, the Ukrainians now are talking about activating territorial defense units and even partisan warfare and there's several hundred thousand Ukrainians who've previously served in the military, many of whom were on the line of contact, and they might be called into service. So, the Russians might be successful in a force-on-force conflict but could find themselves, if they occupied territory, then having to deal with a partisan conflict.

And this, to my mind, has to be a big factor in the Kremlin's calculation. The seizure by the Russian military of Crimea in 2014 was bloodless from the point of view of the Russian military, and it was very popular. The Russians grabbed a chunk of land and no Russian casualties. In the conflict that's gone on in Donbass the last seven years, Russian soldiers have died, but the Kremlin has gone to great extent to portray them as, they're separatists. And they've gone to great effort to hide the fact from the Russian people that the people who've been killed in Donbass are sometimes, if not often, Russian soldiers.

But if now, or if in early in 2022, the Russians were to launch a major military attack on Ukraine, it's going to be clear to everybody that these are Russian soldiers, and the casualties coming home are going to be Russian. And I'm not sure how that plays with the Russian public. There was a poll that came out a couple of days ago that suggests the Kremlin has had some success in portraying the West and Ukraine as at fault for the current crisis, but I'm not sure that then translates to Russian public support for, particularly if it looks like it's going to turn into a quagmire and you have lots of what the Russians call cargo 200 – cargo 200 are transports of dead Russian soldiers back to Russia – if you have lots of that.

And I think that has to be a big concern for the Kremlin, assuming that they're properly calculating the risks. I sometimes worry that when the Russians look at a military effort against Ukraine, they may underestimate the readiness of the Ukrainians to fight and they may make a significant strategic mistake here.

PITA: So if those are all the options that might deter Russia from taking this step, what are some of the options for dialogue, to prevent it from getting there, hopefully.

PIFER: It appears to me that, when President Biden talked with President Putin on December 7 and they talked about dialogue, what really may come into that are two separate dialogues. One is, it looks like President Biden is prepared to engage the United States more energetically in a diplomatic effort, working with the Germans and the French to try to broker a solution to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and Donbass. And that could be helpful. The United States presence there might be able to shake up the negotiating table a little bit, and you've had already, too this week Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried. And so I think they want a dialogue with the United States and it's on broader European security concerns.

Now it's a little bit ironic, I mean, Russia has the world's largest nuclear arsenal, Russia has the largest and most powerful conventional military force in Europe, and you have Russian troops occupying bits of territory of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, but President Putin is demanding legally binding security guarantees for, wait for it, Russia.

Now I believe you can't solve Donbass and resolve that conflict and have a settlement take hold there without some kind of a conversation about broader European security issues, including where Ukraine fits into Europe's security architecture. Now that's going to be a really difficult dialogue and it's not going to be a dialogue just about Russian security concerns, it should be a dialogue that brings in the concerns of NATO, including NATO members close to Russia; it should address Ukrainian security concerns.

There will be work to figure out what's the right format, who's at the table for this discussion, because you can't have this just between the United States and Russia. There's got to be wider participation, and the administration has been very clear that you can't make decisions about Ukraine without Ukraine being present. So they're going to have to figure out diplomatically how that dialogue looks, how it would then work, and then what questions it operates. And I would also suggest it's a dialogue that the United States and the West will be more eager to participate in, or more ready to participate in, if there isn't this threat of a Russian invasion hanging over Ukraine. There's going to be a lot of reluctance to engage in that kind of dialogue under the threat of a Russian gun, but if the Russians de-escalate the situation, then you can have this discussion.

And like I said it's going to be a difficult conversation because you'll get into what kind of assurances, what kind of guarantees might be made. There are some things that the Russians are asking for that are simply not possible. President Putin has said he wants a legal guarantee that NATO will no longer enlarge and that's just not going to happen. First of all. NATO allies would reject that kind of dictate coming from Russia, but to change NATO's open-door policy, you'd have to have a consensus. And I believe very few members, and certainly not 30 NATO members, would agree to that kind of change in policy. Now, having said that. it's pretty clear that today there is no enthusiasm within NATO to put Ukraine on the fast track to membership, in part because NATO countries are not prepared to go to war with Russia over Ukraine. So a formulation I've used in the past about Ukraine possibly coming to NATO,

is “not now” – that's the reality – but not never. That may be a way to defuse the issue; I'm not sure if that would be going far enough to address the Russians, but I'm pretty sure we cannot go as far as the Russians would like.

There's also going to be this question of, you know, what are legitimate Russian security concerns? So, Mr. Putin also expressed concern last week, he said there could be American offensive missiles in Ukraine that could strike Moscow in five to six minutes. Now I actually think that that would be a legitimate concern that might be considered. Of course, there will be also legitimate concerns that NATO has about Russian military forces and Russian missiles. But that would be a legitimate concern and there could be a dialogue on that, and then perhaps some assurances which would address some of the Russian worries.

Now, on the other hand, if Russia is asking basically for a veto over Ukrainian foreign policy choices, I can't think of anybody in the West or certainly in Kyiv would be prepared to consider that a legitimate Russian demand. So if this dialogue gets going, there's going to be a lot of debate over what is legitimate, what is not legitimate. And it's going to be a long, arduous process, but if you can get the diplomacy going, maybe that creates a way to defuse the current situation and defuse some of the underlying issues. And it would be better to talk than to have what could turn out to be the biggest land war in Europe since World War Two breakout.

PITA: Absolutely. Alright, Steve, thank you very much for talking to us about this today.

PIFER: Thank you.