

THE CURRENT: How is US, NATO diplomacy addressing Russian troop buildup?

Thursday, February 10, 2022

HOST: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications

Guest: Angela Stent, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings; Senior Advisor, Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies, Georgetown University

PITA: You're listening to The Current. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Russia and Belarus are engaging in several days of joint military exercises. U.S. and European allies continue diplomatic efforts to de-escalate Russia's buildup of armed forces on Ukraine's border. With us here to talk about the status of the Russian-Ukraine crisis and the diplomatic efforts to resolve that is Angela Stent, a nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings.

Angela, thanks again for talking to us.

STENT: Great to be on your show again.

PITA: Right now, we have seen Russian warships in Sevastopol, which is a major Crimean port city that is part of the territory that was annexed by Russia in 2014. And Ukraine's capital Kyiv is about 75 kilometers, which is a little under 50 miles, from the border with Belarus. So, tensions are understandably very high right now while these military exercises are going on. What can you tell us about the current state of things between Russia and Ukraine and about the negotiations that have been going on?

STENT: Currently we see no de-escalation on the Russian side, in fact, we see an escalation militarily with these exercises going on with Belarus, with these new Russian ships, warships in the Black Sea. So, from a military point of view we just see more Russian troop presence surrounding Ukraine, and these exercises with Belarus that will go on, I believe, until February the 20th.

Now, apart from that, there is a flurry of diplomatic activity going on. Ever since Putin issued these two ultimatums, the two treaties that were presented to the United States and to NATO in December, demanding that NATO promise never to enlarge again and saying that NATO had to withdraw its military presence to where it was in 1997, before the first enlargement.

And since then, the U.S. and Russia have been involved in direct negotiations, NATO and Russia have, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and then we have European leaders: President Macron the latest one in Moscow and Kiev; the German chancellor about to go to Moscow; the British Foreign Secretary in Moscow today. And we have a meeting in Berlin today of the Ukrainian, Russian, German, and French representatives, the so-called Normandy format, to see if they can make progress on the 2015 Minsk agreement, which ended the first phase of this Russian-Ukrainian conflict really in the Donbass.

So, much diplomatic activity. We still have no idea what Putin's ultimate intentions are: is there going to be a major invasion of Ukraine, or is this all for intimidation purposes?

PITA: Thanks, Angela. I want to ask you some more about these overlapping diplomatic efforts. So many of these, as you mentioned, are on a one-to-one basis. Macron goes, and then the German Chancellor Scholz goes, and of course talks with Biden and Putin, and the various foreign ministers, how does this work in terms of sending a consistent message to Putin, presenting a united front?

STENT: Well there's a lot of coordination. Before Macron went to Moscow, there was coordination with the Biden administration, coordination with the Germans, and other EU countries, so I think the U.S. and its European allies have done a good job of presenting a united front, but there are different accents.

Macron, who in the past has questioned the utility of NATO, went to Moscow and talked with Putin apparently about broader issues, like the future of European security and how that might be reorganized. This was probably different than the talking points from some of the other leaders. So I think each leader has their own view of this, but I think in general, there is a united front so far that NATO and the West will not answer, will not agree to the ultimatums that were presented, i.e. NATO will not say it's never going to enlarge and nor will it agree to retreat to its 1997 borders.

But beyond that there is some room for maneuver. For instance, the Germans and the French hope that in the talks that they're having with the Russians and Ukrainians today that they can push forward maybe at least an agreement on a ceasefire in the Donbass region, which would be a start to de-escalating some of the tensions.

I don't think you've seen very much daylight politically between the Europeans and the U.S. I think where there is potentially more disagreement is on the issue of sanctions were Russia to have some kind of military incursion into Ukraine. What kinds of sanctions could we all agree on? And there you certainly see differences of opinion.

PITA: Yes, there was some concern I think about that Germany might be a little more conciliatory based on their greater reliance on Russia's natural gas, including things like the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Has there been any further information on that angle?

STENT: No, when Chancellor Scholz was here last week, President Biden was very clear that the United States would ensure that Nord Stream 2 did not go ahead, were there to be an invasion. Chancellor Scholz just said nothing is off the table, so I think that the Germans, you know the new German government is a coalition government and the Foreign Ministry, which is in the hands of Green Party, and the Chancellery, which is in the hands of the Social Democrats, they don't agree on all of this and they're still trying to work this out amongst themselves. So I think, particularly on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, I'm not sure that there really has been a full agreement on this.

I think part of the problem of all of this is the issue of proportionality. If there were, say, a limited Russian incursion into the Donbass, into southeastern Ukraine, which involved a mixture of cyber, maybe taking a little bit more territory, it's unlikely that you would have a European agreement to these very harsh sanctions that the U.S. is talking about, including energy sanctions. If it's a full-fledged invasion that goes to Kyiv and tries to change the government, then I think you would get more agreement.

PITA: So all of these talks are happening between NATO allies and Russia. Meanwhile, Ukraine, of course, is the territory and the people who are who are in the line of fire, and Ukrainian President Zelensky has in past months, and continued in recent weeks, called for calm, has asked for Western leaders and the media, not to get hysterical. Biden and other NATO leaders have repeatedly affirmed the "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine" principle. How is that playing out in these talks, how has Ukraine's voice consistently been represented?

STENT: Well, Macron, for instance, went to Moscow and Kyiv, and many of the leaders and foreign ministers who've been, including Secretary Blinken, have also visited. There are, I think, constant communications between the United States and Ukrainian government, and between the major European players and the Ukrainian government. Prime Minister Johnson went to Ukraine. So I think, in that sense during these bilateral meetings with different European leaders, Ukrainian interests are certainly brought up.

President Zelensky is concerned about the economic impact on Ukraine of this kind of very loud diplomacy and saying that, you know, an invasion could happen any day, because it's really been dissuading people from investing in Ukraine and its economy isn't doing that well anyway. And I think he doesn't want his population to panic, although what we are seeing is Ukrainians training in civilian defense, learning how to use weapons and things like that in case there is an invasion. So you've had some public friction between Ukraine and the major players on this.

I think that so far, all of the players who have gone there have represented Ukraine's interests. I would think the big exception is Hungary. So, Hungary is a member of NATO and the European Union. Viktor Orban, the prime minister, who's an authoritarian leader, has a close relationship with Putin and a very difficult relationship with Ukraine for various reasons, and so there, I think that certainly would not have been the nation that would have represented Ukraine's interest, but I think the other leaders would have.

PITA: Right, as you mentioned at the top of your remarks, one of the big questions since Russia started building up their troops last year is, is this a bluff, is this just pressure to get agreements, or would Putin really be willing to go through with a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, knowing what that might mean militarily and also economically in terms of the sanctions and repercussions for Russia?

Right now, while these military exercises in Belarus are happening, this seems like a major crisis point because troops will be able to be maneuvering under the cover of these exercises. As we wait for these exercises to end, is this the crisis point? If we get through this and the exercises end and tanks haven't crossed the border, can we breathe a sigh of relief yet or is this still going to go on?

STENT: So I think this is a crisis point. But I think it's quite possible, and I think more and more people are coming down to this view, that this really could be a very long, drawn-out, smoldering, grinding crisis which is just going to continue. Putin wants a subservient Ukraine. He wants more than that: he would like the West to recognize that Russia has a right to a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. He wants to really roll back NATO. He wants to relitigate the end of the Cold War, and he has us at the moment, right? We're all responding to an agenda set by Russia.

It's quite possible that the exercises could end and if there isn't a full-fledged invasion, you could have the withdrawal of some Russian troops. But you could still have Russian troops in Belarus, and you could have this constant kind of pressure of, including things like cyberattacks and what they call hybrid warfare, which is short of actually sending troops or bombing by air, but the pressure could continue. It could still continue to undermine Ukrainian domestic stability. It could continue to, you know, Putin is also watching the extent to which there is allied unity and so far, there's been remarkable allied unity, but if this goes on for months or years, I think that allied unity would fray. The domestic populations in most Western countries, they don't want to get involved in any conflict with Russia. So, I think that's a scenario whose longer-term implications at the moment we can't foresee, but I think it's part of a longer-term plan by the Russians to get us to accept that Crimea is part of Russia, that Ukraine has to be in Russia's sphere of influence. The Russians can play this as a long game. So I think that, even if there is no invasion at the end of these exercises with Belarus, this doesn't mean that it's over.

I mean, the diplomatic negotiations will certainly continue, you've had Russian troops, really since March, surrounding Ukraine. Some of them withdrew after President Biden called Putin. When this was happening early on in the spring, he had a meeting with Putin. I'm sure President Putin wants another meeting with President Biden, so I think we have to understand that we're in this for the long haul.

PITA: Alright. Angela, thank you again, as always, for talking to us about this and filling us in on what's happening.

STENT: Thank you.