

Moscow's military build-up over the Russia-Ukraine border: potential scenarios following the new incursion

WRITTEN BY LORENZO GIORDANO

Image credits:<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/3/russia-has-90000-troops-near-ukraine-border-kyiv-says>



Russia has raised the alarm in Ukraine and throughout the international community in recent days by massing its armed forces close to the Ukrainian border. The military build-up has raised fears of a possible Russian offensive that could push beyond the areas of eastern Ukraine currently under Kremlin control and lead to a dramatic escalation in the violent seven-year conflict between the two countries. In April, American and allied officials sounded the alarm as Moscow built up forces near its border with Ukraine. But the current build-up, which appears to involve more troops and sophisticated weaponry, has engendered more concerns – particularly as Russia has moved to block Ukrainian surveillance drones. Hostilities have also spiked since Ukraine used one of its drones to attack a separatist howitzer, prompting Russia to scramble jets.

In particular, Russia's decision to mobilise thousands of troops along the Russian-Ukrainian border has sparked fears, as it did last April, about the possibility of an invasion of Ukraine or its eastern part, currently disputed between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian militias. According to the Ukrainian government, the soldiers that Russia has massed on the border with Ukraine number about 114,000 (92,000 on the ground and the rest engaged in air and sea operations) (Financial Times), and are stationed in the north, east, and south of the Donbas, a region in south-eastern Ukraine in which the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk are established.

The ultimate goal of Moscow, however, is still unclear, since the military build-up on the border might serve different purposes, including taking control over selected areas, destabilising the current Ukrainian government – increasingly hostile to Russia – or testing the West's opposition to a show of force. In Emma Ashford's opinion (Atlantic Council study centre), a military invasion of Ukraine is unlikely: even if tensions between the European Union and Russia are higher now than in April, she reckons that the invasion of Ukraine – the second largest country on the European continent – would not be a realistic goal and that Russia would rather aim at strengthening its control only over specific zones, perhaps by opening a Russian-controlled passage between Crimea and the Russian border (Ashford, 2021). Based upon another scenario, Russia is attempting to destabilise and weaken the current Ukrainian government, as it has been doing for years through different strategies, to potentially push for the establishment of a pro-Russian government. In fact, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, elected in 2019, has gradually taken a more antagonistic stance towards Russia, moving steadily closer to the United States.

According to other analysts, Russia is planning to invade Ukraine. For instance, Gustav Gressel (European Council on Foreign Relations) stated that military exercises of Russian troops on the border are not just demonstrations of power, but tests to wrap up the conquest of the Donbas region, perceived as unfinished following the annexation of Crimea and the 2015 Minsk Protocol, which aimed to implement an immediate ceasefire but ultimately failed to stop the fighting. Gressel does not rule out that Russia could go even further (Gressel, 2021).

The stationing of Russian troops had already worried both the Ukrainian government and many Western governments last April, but this year a new factor comes into play, namely that the Russian soldiers are better equipped, according to the New York Times, particularly as Russia has moved to jam Ukrainian surveillance drones (Barnes and Schmitt, 2021). Accordingly, American intelligence would share a series of details and assumptions on Russia's potential plans with its European allies. In this direction, Bloomberg referred to a ground invasion from multiple fronts, backed by the air force. (Nardelli and Jacobs, 2021). According to the Financial Times (2021), concerns about the possibility of an invasion are the highest since 2014, when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea. In the east of Ukraine, tensions have never ended: the Russian Army and separatist militias have reportedly killed about 14,000 Ukrainians and blocked the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) from accessing the area on several occasions.

In response, Ukraine's Ministry of Defence announced on 17 November that its armed forces conducted military exercises along the Crimean border. According to the announcement, the manoeuvres were held in the Kherson region, located close to the administrative border of Crimea, and involved aircraft, tanks, artillery, and a battalion of marines. The marines carried out activities to neutralise a potential enemy attack. After successfully completing the mission, the military then carried out air raids, occupying the surrounding high ground and repelling the enemy advance. The Ministry of Defence also published footage showing Ukrainian marines using large-calibre machine guns, grenade launchers, tanks, and helicopters. (Reuters, 2021).

Furthermore, the United States is already sending warships to the Black Sea as a signal of deterrence. In April 2021, it deployed fighter jets to Poland from nuclear-assigned squadrons of the US Air Forces in Europe. The US was successful in its aim: two days later, Valery Gerasimov, Russia's chief of the general staff, called off the exercises taking place close to the Ukrainian border. (Gressel, 2021) The US presence in the Black Sea increased as of 29 October, when the US Navy's Sixth Fleet announced that the missile destroyer USS Porter was heading for the Black Sea, where it joined NATO partners the next day. Later, on 12 November, the Russian Ministry of Defence revealed that the destroyer Porter, the command ship Mount Whitney, and the tanker John Lenthall, belonging to the US Navy, had arrived in the south-western part of the Black Sea after passing through the Georgian port of Batumi and were continuing to move westwards.

In conclusion, one can argue that the deployment of Russian soldiers on the Ukrainian border could ultimately be a show of force, an attempt by Putin to test Western opposition to Russia to see how far the US and EU are willing to go to defend Ukraine. In April, the United States proved itself ready, at least in words, to intervene and support Ukraine. Circumstances are different when it comes to the European countries: Putin has caught them at their weakest, mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, there is a void of European leadership due to the imminent end of the mandate of Angela Merkel, Putin's main interlocutor in the Union. On the other hand, there is an ongoing energy crisis, and European countries are more dependent than ever on Russian gas supplies. It would not be convenient for them to kick off a confrontation with Russia to stand up for Ukraine.

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