

*Krasno Analysis:*  
**Weekly Spotlight, No.2/2022**  
*(January 31, 2022)*



## **Is War in Ukraine Imminent? Putin's Objectives and US and European Dilemmas**

(1550 words)

**Klaus Larres**

According to many media and government outlets in the US and also in the UK, a **full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia** is likely to happen within the next couple of weeks or so.

Meanwhile Ukrainian President **Volodymyr Zelenskyy** has played down such a scenario, asking President **Joe Biden** "to calm down the messaging," not least in order to stabilize the fragile Ukrainian economy, and is busily promoting his country as an attractive tourist destination. Most Ukrainian scholars I talked to at the recent Rondeli security conference in Tbilisi, Georgia, are also quite skeptical about the likelihood of a major Russian invasion.

Likewise, many EU governments, not least the new German government, but also many others **can't quite believe that a major war in Europe** with Russia may be just around the corner. They are convinced that continuing dialogue and engagement with Russia will do the trick to resolve the situation.

Still, the fact remains that more than **100.000 Russian troops, 1500 tanks**, and a huge armory of heavy weapons are amassed along the Russian-Ukrainian border. Recently, the Kremlin has established field hospitals and delivered blood supplies to the potential frontline. Some western analysts have speculated that Russia may even move **tactical nuclear weapons** closer to the border with Ukraine.

What are we to make of all this and the contradictory thinking within the West?

### **Would Russia benefit from a full-scale invasion of Ukraine?**

There is little doubt in the minds of NATO military analysts that soon Russia will have assembled enough troops and weaponry on the Russian side of the Russian-Ukrainian border to conquer Ukraine, including Kiev, in a rather short period of time.

Yet, it is unclear how this would benefit Moscow. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 the Ukrainian forces have been much strengthened (now numbering 200.000 troops plus a 100.000 strong reserve force). They can be expected to put up a fierce resistance, including prolonged guerilla warfare. Undoubtedly a Russian invasion would lead to **much bloodshed** with numerous casualties and horrific injuries among both Russian and Ukrainian troops.

Whether Russian soldiers would actually fight their Ukrainian and mostly Russian-speaking brethren with the same dogged persistence they have shown in other wars remains an open question. **Disciplinary problems** may well become a serious concern among the invading Russian forces.

**Occupying and attempting to subdue most of Ukraine** and the increasingly nationalistic and anti-Russian Ukrainian population for a prolonged period of time would also cause serious headaches for the

Kremlin. The rift with the West in all aspects and perhaps ultimately (contrary to current rhetoric) even running the **risk of a commitment of NATO troops to Ukraine** would be highly problematic to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

It is by no means clear, moreover, that the **Russian population** would support a major war, once the initial nationalistic rallying behind Putin had subsided. Putin's domestic standing is less secure than it used to be. There is much underlying discontent about the plunging standards of living in the country and the ever-increasing stifling strength of the state apparatus.

Although Russia has amassed a **huge currency reserve fund** of more than 630 billion dollars for emergency situations, nevertheless the **Russian economy would be devastated** by US and European measures taken to quickly cut off the country from the global economic system and impose unprecedented sanctions on the country and its leading actors.

***Nordstream II***, that controversial gas pipeline between Russia and Germany, would certainly be abandoned and probably destroyed. At present the US and the EU are making frenzied alternative arrangements for ensuring the continued gas flow to Europe in the event of Russia's exclusion from much of the global economy. It is unlikely that China or other pro-Russian countries in the Middle East and elsewhere could quickly replace Russia's economic dependence on the West to any significant extent.

In addition, of course, the western world, under the reinvigorated leadership of the US and NATO, would be united as seldom before in confronting a wholesale Russian invasion of Ukraine. It's difficult to see how any European country, including certainly Germany and even

Hungary, could breach western solidarity in such a case. **The unity of the West is hardly what Putin wishes to bring about by his actions.**

Thus, it is **entirely unclear what Putin would actually gain** from a full-scale invasion of Ukraine apart from demonstrating that Russia is still a superpower the world needs to take seriously. And Moscow has abundantly demonstrated this already during the last couple of months in any case.

Putin, judging by all available accounts, is an **ice-cold and highly rational person** and not someone inclined to give in to spur of the moment decisions and emotional reactions.

### **The possible annexation of the Donbas region**

Still, having amassed so many troops and weapons at the Russian-Ukrainian border and pushed much of the world into expecting the imminent outbreak of war, **Putin can hardly simply withdraw.** Some vague western (or Ukrainian) promises and declarations that Ukraine and other former Soviet states such as Georgia will not join NATO for the foreseeable future and that NATO will perhaps withdraw some weaponry and reduce maneuvers in Eastern Europe will no longer be sufficient.

This would be seen as a climb-down from the Russian point of view. It would **make Putin look weak**, both domestically and, perhaps even more importantly, globally.

The alternative for Putin is the **full annexation of the Donbas region**, which is already under the control of pro-Russian authorities based in Donetsk and Luhansk. The model for the annexation of the Donbas region, which directly borders Russia, is not only the annexation of **Crimea** but also the de-facto annexation of the Georgian territories of **South Ossetia**

and **Abkhazia** after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 though Moscow declared them to be independent states.

Yet, recently the so-called **Normandy process** for implementing the 2015 **Minsk II agreement** among Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany has been revived by a meeting in Paris. Another meeting will take place soon in Berlin. However, so far only advisers of the four governments rather than senior politicians have participated.

**If full political autonomy within the Ukrainian state and home-rule status for the Donbas region** could be agreed, a Russian invasion and annexation of Donbas could perhaps be avoided.

Yet, understandably the government in Kiev is **reluctant** to essentially cede its influence in that part of eastern Ukraine. If these talks were to fail, as they may well do, we might see a Russian incursion into/invasion of eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Donbas region.

While such a military conflict would also lead to a strong western reaction, the economic and also political consequences for Putin would be much less serious.

Even **President Biden** recognized this during a two-hour press conference on January 19, 2022. "It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having a fight about what to do and not do," he explained, adding "there are differences in NATO as to what countries are willing to do depending on what happens."

In fact, it could lead to a **highly acrimonious debate among Western nations** on whether or not annexation of the Donbas region counts as a "minor incursion" or a partial or full-scale invasion, what the precise economic consequences would be and whether or not, for instance, *Nordstream II* should still go ahead.

In short, the West would be severely divided. Western tensions and divisions, which at present are being successfully contained beneath the surface, will break out with a vengeance.

### **Putin's aims: dividing NATO and the EU & weakening US Power**

Putin's ultimate objective is most likely not the difficult takeover of Ukraine but **re-establishing Russia as a formidable and permanent European power**, thus re-writing the European security order, and dividing NATO and the EU in the process.

In the midst of squabbling allies and the declining threat of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and incursions onto the territory of other eastern European countries, such as the Baltic states, the **US can be expected to soon tire of the situation**. US attention would be unlikely to remain focused on Russia and Eastern Europe as strongly as at present.

In fact, throughout the current Russia/Ukraine crisis many members of the Biden administration have repeatedly explained that the country's **main competitor and global rival remains China**. Washington largely views the current crisis with Russia as a distraction and in its heart of hearts is only reluctantly engaged, not least for the sake of keeping NATO and the transatlantic alliance together.

As during the Obama administration, in the Biden White House Russia continues to be still largely viewed as **merely a regional rather than a truly global power**, which seriously threatens Washington's superpower standing.

It is China and the deep polarization of American politics and society, race relations, inflation woes, the pandemic and not least the important mid-term elections later this year, which predominantly occupy the Biden administration.

Perhaps Putin is confident that once he has firmly re-established Russia's power and sphere of influence in Eastern Europe short of a major war, the US will reluctantly get used to this new state of affairs in Europe. **Washington will lose interest and turn its attention once again toward China and not least America's many domestic problems.**

*Prof. Klaus Larres is the Richard M Krasno Distinguished Professor of History and International Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also directs the Krasno Global Affairs & Business Council/Krasno Global Events Series at UNC.*

### **Books just published by Klaus Larres:**

*Uncertain Allies: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Threat of a United Europe* (Yale University Press, 2022);

*Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics* (edited book, Routledge, 2022);

*Terrorism and Transatlantic Relations: Threats and Challenges* (co-edited with Tobias Hof; Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).





***Krasno Analysis: Weekly Spotlight” has been founded and is edited by Prof. Klaus W. Larres. “Krasno Analysis” is part of the UNC Krasno Global Events series/Krasno Global Affairs and Business Council. [www.krasnoevents.com](http://www.krasnoevents.com) All opinions expressed are the views of the authors and do not necessarily correspond with the views of the founder and editor or the UNC Krasno Global Events series. For comments and responses, please email “larres@unc.edu.”***