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Ukraine crisis may be Putin's test for the Biden administration

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Is the Kremlin testing the Biden administration in Ukraine? Or is Russia ready for war?

On Saturday, Russia and Ukraine mutually expelled diplomats, the latest move in a series of escalations between the two countries. Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops on Ukraine's eastern border and in Crimea, part of what the Kremlin calls a "readiness" exercise. Ready for what is the question.

Moscow's moves are reminiscent of events seven years ago as it readied to occupy and illegally annex Crimea. At issue now is the border Donetsk Region, which like Crimea has a high proportion of ethnic Russians.

In 2014 armed rebels, reputedly with direct Russian support, proclaimed independent "people's republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk, sparking civil conflict. Ukraine mobilized its armed forces but was unable to recapture these breakaway areas. A shaky cease-fire had been in effect since the 2015 Minsk accords, with the Russian rebel groups maintaining de facto control over their pseudo-states.

Replaying Crimea and Georgia

Now the cease-fire has broken down. Deadly incidents are multiplying along the line of contact. Russia has threatened to intervene to protect civilians if Ukraine moves to reincorporate the rebel areas, and Moscow has already granted citizenship to over 600,000 ethnic Russians in the area. This is critical because Vladimir Putin would prefer to be seen as a peace enforcer rather than an aggressor. And if the rebel governments ask Moscow to intervene, it would be a replay of the same rationale used to annex Crimea in 2014 and intervene in Georgia in 2008.

In fact, humanitarian intervention at the request of friendly governments was the same explanation given for the invasions of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Afghanistan in 1979. The song remains the same.

Various theories have been advanced for the cause of the renewed crisis. The Kremlin could be alarmed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's pursuit of NATO membership, something Moscow has always opposed and sees as a direct threat. Perhaps also Putin is using the crisis to distract from his internal political problems. Maybe also the man who described the breakup of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century is simply making up for lost time.

The Ukraine crisis might also be a test for the Biden administration. After all, it is unclear what the United States and its allies would be willing to do if Russia took overt military action. Putin could see a replay of the 2014 crisis when the Obama administration made no effective response when Russia rolled into Crimea. Seizing the Donetsk Region might be his next logical move.

So far, the Biden team has given mixed messages, strongly warning the Kremlin against aggression but also seeking negotiations. We saw the same approach with last week's sanctions against Russia for the SolarWinds computer hack and alleged interference in the 2020 election. The statement announcing the mild and symbolic sanctions was accompanied by a request for a summit meeting. Small stick, big carrot.

More signals were sent on the high seas. Russia has been building up its naval presence off the Ukrainian coast in concert with its ground forces, also cast as part of training maneuvers. Russia warned U.S. ships to stay away for their "own good" because a stray missile from a random live fire exercise might wreak havoc.

Two U.S. warships had been scheduled to transit the area as part of a routine assertion of the right to access, but the Biden team chose not to provoke the Russians and canceled the mission. An emboldened Kremlin then closed sea access to some areas near Ukraine into the fall.

Allowing Russia to dictate where and when U.S. vessels may sail, even for pragmatic reasons, sends the wrong signal. It is a far cry from the Reagan era when U.S. and Soviet vessels in the same contested area bumped each other rather than back down.

Russia, Iran, China all testing USA

It makes sense that the Biden team would seek to repair bilateral relations with Russia that were so needlessly damaged by the heated rhetoric and unproven claims from Democrats over the past four years. However, this may also be perceived as weakness on the part of the White House, which to an aggressor only spells opportunity.

The latest threat assessment from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence notes that the United States expects Moscow to "insert itself into crises when Russian interests are at stake, it can turn a power vacuum into an opportunity, or the anticipated costs of action are low." Check all three of those boxes.

We see the same developments in Iran, which is ramping up its nuclear enrichment program to record levels, and the People's Republic of China, which is increasing its military pressure on Taiwan. Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, has noted that "China and Russia are testing our cohesion, and they're doing it in today, whether it's along the Ukrainian-Russian border or in the Taiwan Strait."

Few analysts predict Russia will intervene in Ukraine, just as few predicted the Crimean annexation until it was too late. However, it is worth asking what price Moscow has paid for its earlier acts of aggression, and whether this would deter Putin from acting again. Then-Vice President Biden was the point man for the Obama administration's 2014 Crimea response when he declared, "As long as Russia continues on this dark path, they will face increasing political and economic isolation."

Did they?

President Barack Obama put it another, more definitive way: "We are not going to be getting into a military excursion in Ukraine."

In other words, goodbye Crimea.

We know what Putin stands to gain by attacking Ukraine. The White House has to figure out what to tell him he has to lose, and quickly.

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