

IN BRIEF

The Russia-Ukraine Crisis: A Scorecard on Biden's Response

By Stephen Sestanovich, *CFR Expert* | December 23, 2021 12:25 pm (EST)

U.S. officials have preserved NATO unity in the face of Russian military threats, but they have not yet defined a clear negotiating agenda—or put Moscow on the rhetorical defensive.

With large numbers of Russian troops massed on the border with Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin regularly issuing new threats, U.S. President Joe Biden's administration faces a genuine danger of war in Europe. How well have the president and his senior advisors handled the crisis? The record is mixed: they have shown diplomatic skill in some elements of their response but have conveyed confusion in others. The administration may yet be able to defuse tensions, but it needs to work harder at exposing the absurdity of many Russian demands—and preserving U.S. freedom of action.

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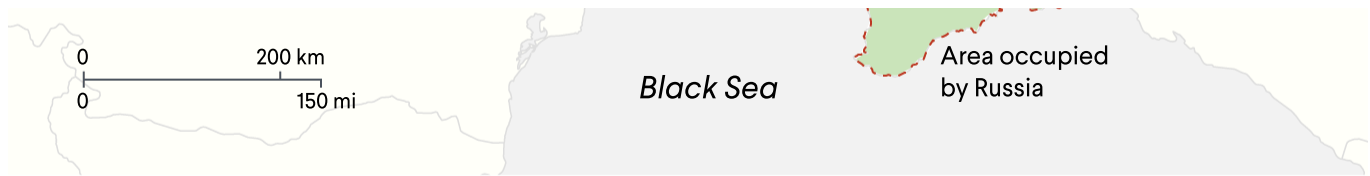
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High marks. U.S. policy has been most successful in two important areas. First, it has been able to maintain near-total unanimity within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Meeting in Latvia in early December, the alliance's foreign ministers condemned Russian military pressures on Ukraine. Subsequent meetings, both in Washington and in European capitals, have shown similar unity. Second, these statements sent the same strong message: a Russian invasion would trigger new U.S. and European sanctions dwarfing those that followed the 2014 crisis, when Russia seized Crimea and started the separatist war in eastern Ukraine. European leaders, many feared, would muddy this message in separate meetings or calls with Putin, but they haven't done so.





UKRAINE AT A GLANCE

Area

603,550 square kilometers
(largest country in Europe,
excluding Russia)

Population

44 million

Religions

Orthodox Christianity,
Catholicism, Protestantism

Primary Languages

Ukrainian (official), Russian

Form of Government

Semipresidential republic

GDP

\$155.6 billion

GDP Per Capita

\$3,727

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank.

A passing grade—with question marks. Other elements of the administration's record are more problematic. It has tried (appropriately) to defuse the crisis by moving from possible military confrontation to diplomatic give-and-take. Biden held a video meeting with Putin, and a face-to-face meeting could follow. Also, senior U.S. officials visited Moscow to explore Russian complaints, and more formal talks are expected in January. Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security advisor, has described the agenda of such talks as the same one the United States and Russia have discussed "for decades," meaning items such as force levels and deployments in Europe or the range and capabilities of advanced weapons systems.

Yet none of these negotiations granted Russia the "sphere of influence" that now seems its primary goal. Putin and his advisors are clearly determined to get Western governments to put this issue on the agenda of new talks. In reply, U.S. officials have labeled some Russian demands, such as the removal of NATO troops and weapons from

states that joined the alliance after the Cold War, “unacceptable.” They have not, however, dispelled the impression that Washington will eventually agree to discuss these demands—or that Putin’s military threats have obliged them to do so.

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Flunking the test. The Biden administration’s record has been weakest in two critical areas. First, it has made no sustained effort to counter Putin’s insistence that he is merely responding to the West’s own “obviously aggressive stance”—crucial for Russian domestic audiences. The Kremlin’s claim that NATO threatens Russian security is belied by the tiny, partly symbolic Western military presence in, for example, the three Baltic states. (U.S. rotational deployments are greatest in Lithuania and usually top out at about six hundred troops.) That such forces create a serious defense capability is dubious at best; that they represent an offensive threat of any kind is laughable.

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Second, in threatening economic sanctions in the event of further aggression against Ukraine, Washington is downplaying other measures that might be needed even if Russia calls off an invasion. After the Cold War, NATO built no permanent military presence in Eastern Europe, and troop levels in Western Europe declined sharply. Only marginal forward deployments followed the 2014 crisis. Now, Putin's actions and rhetoric are forcing a reexamination of this strategy. U.S. officials should make clear that future force levels will depend above all on how much Moscow threatens its neighbors. The Biden administration's handling of the current crisis will be measured by whether the United States remains free to give allies and partners the support they

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