

The Ukraine crisis: a view from Moscow

What does Vladimir Putin want and are his goals achievable?

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This is an audio transcript of the Rachman Review podcast episode: The Ukraine crisis — a view from Moscow

Gideon Rachman

Hello and welcome to the Rachman Review. I'm Gideon Rachman, chief foreign affairs commentator of the Financial Times. In this week's edition, we're looking once again at the threat of war over Ukraine and the crisis in relations between Russia and the west. But this time we're getting a view from Moscow. My guest is Dmitri Trenin. He's director of a think-tank, the Carnegie Moscow Center. Before becoming an academic in 1993 he served for more than 20 years in the armed forces of the Soviet Union and then Russia. He's somebody who's thought a lot about the connections between military might and foreign policy. So what are Russia's real aims in this crisis and how likely is war? One of the unusual things about this crisis is how open the United States and its allies have been in discussing the build-up of Russian forces along Ukraine's border and the threat of a Russian invasion. It's sometimes felt as if diplomacy is being conducted in public. Here's US President Joe Biden suggesting that it's more likely than not that President Vladimir Putin of Russia will make a military move on Ukraine.

Joe Biden

I'm not so sure he has, he's certain what he's going to do. My guess is he will move in. He has to do something. And by the way, I've indicated to him . . . The two things he said to me that he wants, guarantees — one is Ukraine will never be part of Nato, and two, that Nato are there will not be strategic weapons stationed in Ukraine. We can work out something on the second piece, pretending what he does along the Russian line as well, Russian border in the European area of Russia. On the first piece, we have a number of treaties internationally and in Europe that suggests that you get to choose who you wanna be with. But the likelihood that Ukraine is gonna join Nato in the near term is not very likely based on much more work they have to do in terms of democracy and a few other things going on there and whether or not the major allies in the west would vote to bring Ukraine in right now. So there's room to work if he wants to do that.

Gideon Rachman

So I started my conversation with Dmitri Trenin by asking him about Biden's assessment. The Americans think a war is coming. Isn't that how things feel in Moscow?

Dmitri Trenin

No, it doesn't. I was actually surprised by that statement. I think Biden was certainly looking at some intelligence reports. But when you sit in Moscow, the only likely scenario for a military flare-up seems to be an attempt by Ukraine to gain territory in Donbas or to provoke the Russians into doing something larger than usual in the Donbas area. You don't get the impression that Russia is getting ready for a massive offensive against Ukraine.

Gideon Rachman

So how do you account for the move of, you know, what is said to be 100,000 plus troops up to the Ukrainian border?

Dmitri Trenin

Well, a 100,000 troops is not such a huge force with regard to a country like Ukraine. It's a country which is largest in Europe after Russia, and that number has not been increasing since late last year.

So the build-up all happened in the autumn and early winter of 2021. So there has been nothing in terms of at least as western intelligence reports to the outside world because I haven't seen any public. I don't think that there are any public Russian announcements as to how many troops Russia has concentrated in that area. So I think it's a pressure instrument in the hands of President Putin, who is now using military means for demonstration purposes at this point, but ready to move in if ordered as leverage with regard to the United States and the rest of the west.

Gideon Rachman

So you talk about the Russian view being that the only thing could spark actual fighting is a Ukrainian provocation. On the other hand, as you say, Putin is clearly using a build-up of forces for leverage to try to advance his particular demands about Ukraine not joining Nato and now about indeed the withdrawal of Nato troops from Romania and Bulgaria and so on. Where did this crisis come from? Because again, in London, maybe in Washington, people really weren't paying attention to this issue over the summer, seemed to have been taken by surprise by it. Did you see this coming a long way out, sitting in Moscow?

Dmitri Trenin

Well, I think this present crisis all started in early '21, in March and April. The first time that Russia concentrated a sizeable amount of forces around Ukraine recently. But if you take a longer view, this crisis has been accumulating over the past couple of decades because if you sit in the Kremlin or in the general staff in Moscow, the analysis that you have of Russia's geopolitical geostrategic situation facing Europe is that over the last 25 years, Nato has been marching all the way to the Russian border. And you have Nato forces in Estonia, two hours drive from St Petersburg. If Nato honours its promise to Ukraine, you might have Nato forces very close to Moscow in Ukraine. And the developments in Belarus seen by the Kremlin as having been, well, at least supported by the people in neighbouring western countries. So if you're Vladimir Putin, who has been in power for the last 20 plus years, you will know that four out of five waves of Nato enlargement or expansion in Europe have happened on his watch. And as a result, European security, which previously had been placed on the platform, if you like, of US-Soviet confrontation, and Helsinki, it was Yalta, Helsinki was all about: let's add two pillar, foundation of European security. After 1991 and 1989, Europe's security has been essentially dominated by the United States, with Nato being its chief instrument. Now Putin's objective, I think, is to change that. He wants to replace the Nato-centric, US-dominated system of European security with an architecture which again will be resting on two pillars, one being the west and the other being Russia. And the two will be in some sort of an agreement, some sort of an arrangement about which side is responsible for what and which side is obligated to do what and cannot do what with regard to the other side. That's the plan, I think.

Gideon Rachman

Do you think the plan seems to be having any chance of making progress at the moment? I mean, although the mood has been pretty grim in the last few weeks, I thought the tone after the meeting between Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, and Tony Blinken, the US secretary of state, was relatively positive. The Americans saying they would come back with some proposals. So sitting in Moscow, do you think they think that there is still room for diplomacy or do they think that window is narrowing?

Dmitri Trenin

I don't think that they think in those terms. We have a situation which should be analysed at different levels. At the level of diplomacy as you said, there is dialogue. And this is not a small thing if you look at things from Moscow. The west has not been engaged in a dialogue with Russia on European security issues since the days of Gorbachev. After that, the west did not need a partner to do things that it wanted to do. It didn't have to consult anyone, and the slogan of the west during that period, which I think still continues, is that no one has any veto on our decisions. And now people talk about Russian demands, proposals as being maximalist, as being too much, as being something that the other side will never agree to. But at the same time, they're talking, and one takeaway from the Blinken-Lavrov meeting in Geneva was that Blinken has confirmed that he will be sending American written responses point by point to the Russian proposals presented at the end of last year. Well, this is a tactical gain, but it's a gain, this is one thing. Another thing is that there is this military situation,

which I think has been more or less stable. It's certainly a matter of concern, and it's actually designed to be a matter of concern. Putin, when speaking to Russian diplomats at the end of last year, said there's tension on the western side and that's not a bad thing. So basically, as I said before, it's all about leveraging the west to move in the direction of at least considering Russian security needs, Russian security demands. And then there's yet another level, this information environment. And it's interesting. You look at the west awash in the talk of an imminent war in Ukraine, and now this includes the president of the United States of all people. And people have been setting deadlines for the start of hostilities; people have been coming up with all sorts of scenarios. In Russia, all these things are — I'm talking about western assessments, of western projections — all these things are available on television in spades. They are discussing all those western reports about what Russia is doing, what Putin is up to and all that. But if you look around, things continue to work more or less as before as if nothing were happening. It's interesting that Ukraine is closer to Russia in that sense, at least a population, the bulk of the population of Ukraine. They're a bit relaxed about the prospect of a war. So you live in very different environments and then you're you're asking questions why this is so and who is playing what sort of game. I think Putin's game is, to me at least, clear in terms of its objectives, in terms of its instruments. I do not think that a large-scale invasion of Ukraine unprovoked, and this is an important caveat, is something that Russia is planning. If there is a provocation, I think they will think very hard about how to respond to that. A major provocation will probably provoke a massive response that Putin doesn't have to be told by Blinken about the underside of a major military operation in Ukraine. I think he knows these things so much better than even western intelligence.

Gideon Rachman

You paint Russia's concerns very clearly focused on security, on the sense that Nato is getting a bit too close for comfort and so on. Yet it also seems to me, you view it from a distance, that there's a strong emotional side to it. I mean, you read the essay that Putin published over the summer about Ukraine, a lot of it is a sort of critique saying more or less that Ukrainian independence is unnatural, that Ukraine and Russia are as one, that there's a sort of expressions of love for Ukraine, but also that this is a country that's been infiltrated by neo-Nazis and so on. How much is that emotional, nationalistic side driving some of this?

Dmitri Trenin

Well, I think it's certainly true to say that for Putin and for many Russians, Ukraine continues to be part of historical Russian state. I don't think that the idea today is to integrate Ukraine into a new edition of the Russian state, of an expanded Russian state. But certainly the idea is to, over time, help Ukraine be different from what it is today. What they want, I think, is a Ukraine at least nominally neutral between Russia and Nato. I think that's the endgame in this current diplomatic military stand-off between Russia and the United States/the west. But if Ukraine stays outside Nato, if it's not let's say "re-educated", reformatted to fit the western pattern, then there remains a chance that Ukraine might be in the future, a country that would be much friendlier to Russia than today. And I think that certainly any Russian leader would want to have some sort of leverage, some sort of influence in a country so close to Russia and so important to Russia as Ukraine. But having said all that, I don't think that the way to resolve the Ukraine problem for Russia is to invade it, occupy it and integrate it within the rest of the Russian Federation. I don't think that serious people believe that this is possible or this is the way to go. There are some people who think that way, but I would say that they are still on the margins.

Gideon Rachman

Yeah, I mean, do you feel that perhaps if that is Russia's long-term goal, that threatening them with invasion or appearing to threaten them with invasion, will long-term be counterproductive? I mean, I realise at times of national crisis there's a slight pressure to show unity and so on. But looking back a few months ago, you wrote an article for foreign affairs, didn't you, where you were questioning whether this was the right strategy. And I think you said, you know, there are ways of building bridges with Ukraine through business, through culture, through education that aren't quite as militarised as what they're doing now.

Dmitri Trenin

Well, I still stand by those words. Again, there's a difference clearly between, let's say, my analysis of the Kremlin's policy toward Ukraine and my own thinking about the best way of dealing with Ukraine from the Russian perspective. But I think that the current build-up, unlike the picture that's painted in the west, is not so much directed at Ukraine. I think it's directed at the US. There's only one partner for Russia or one counterpart for Russia in the matters of European security, and that counterpart does not sit in Europe, it sits in the United States of America. So to get the attention of the US, you have to demonstrate your capability and your resolve. This is something that Putin is doing. Otherwise, the United States will ignore you. I think Putin has reached his conclusion some time ago that words only, that arguments only, won't move the United States one inch. Americans only understand the language of force, Putin believes, and he is talking with them using that particular language. So it's not about Ukraine. Ukraine sits at the centre of the problem, but the problem is bigger. The problem is the US for Russia.

Gideon Rachman

Now, you said that Putin's view is that the US only understands the language of force. You'll hear many in the west saying the same about Putin. Now it's made clear, the Americans have made clear, they're not going to intervene militarily to defend Ukraine. They are, however, talking about massive sanctions. How concerned do you think Russia is by those threats? How far have they been able to prepare for that eventuality?

Dmitri Trenin

Well, I think that they're very concerned. I think that they are treating it very seriously because if that happens, as Putin said, that will lead to a complete break of relations, whatever that may mean, and it may mean a lot. I think that they are engaged in contingency planning in all spheres, starting with finance and economics and many other spheres. So they are taking it seriously, whether they believe it's more likely or less likely is another thing because again, it's my conviction that the scenario that is painted most often in the western media, ie of a massive Russian onslaught to Ukraine, to subjugate that former Soviet republic, is not the scenario that Putin is prepared to exercise or is willing to exercise.

Gideon Rachman

This is necessarily speculation because obviously the Kremlin aren't gonna be airing their internal debates. But how far do you think they've gamed this out, and how much do you think there continues to be discussion within Putin's inner circle and his advisers about what needs to be done? I suppose I'm asking all the different schools of thought? In the west we know there are hawks and doves in Washington. Are there hawks and doves in Moscow?

Dmitri Trenin

No. Moscow is no longer ruled by the politburo. In the politburo you did have nuances of opinion, sometimes differences, but very seldom. Putin is a pre-communist leader in that sense. He is a tsar. The Security Council of the Russian Federation, which is sometimes called a new politburo, is more like king and council. So these notables may advise the president, but they don't have a vote. The president may invite them to express their views, and he gets those views. But the most important decisions, certainly the decisions about war and peace, are taken by the president himself on the basis of various analyses that he gets from the people around him, particularly from the intelligence community, but he is taking those decisions single-handedly. That was the case in Ukraine in 2014. That I think is the case now. All other people are executing the president's will. And I don't think that there's a basic difference in opinions at that level. If you have serious differences with the president, then you'd better quit. And no one is quitting at this point.

Gideon Rachman

So a lot, a huge amount depends on Putin's judgment, given the structure of that system. You alluded earlier to how Russia would respond to sanctions and Putin saying at that point, we're in all-out confrontation. So let me end with, you know, the biggest question of them all. I don't think either Russia or the United States wants a war with the other, or is planning for a war with the other. Maybe they're planning in the abstract sense, but do you think there is a risk that this current confrontation escalates so that it's not just a conflict in Ukraine, but actually a war between Nato and Russia?

Dmitri Trenin

Well, I think that the situation is serious, and I think we should be very careful on both sides. Also, careful with predictions, careful where there are signals because signals can sometimes be misread and misinterpreted. At this point, I fully agree with you: not the United States, not Russia, wants a conflict even in Ukraine. Forget a wider conflict. I think that the United States is also making sure that no one on the Ukrainian side does something stupid to provoke the Russians a little bit too much. And I'm sure that everyone in the Donetsk region who are leaning toward Russia, I don't think anyone will step out of line. So it's a war of nerves clearly, which is an integral part of this complex crisis, essentially about European security, with military playing a role of a pressure instrument. And the diplomats will eventually, I think, find a way to some sort of an accord, maybe a partial accord and not resolving the entire issue. I may be engaged in wishful thinking now, but this may be the first time that the United States and Russia will have reached some sort of an understanding about some elements of European security, which will make that security not an unconditional prerogative, a privilege of the west. But we'll have to take Russian considerations, Russian views, Russian interests, Russian needs into account. Maybe not to the extent that Mr Putin wishes. But I think the scales will tip a little bit in that direction. That could be a way out of this crisis.

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Gideon Rachman

That was Dmitri Trenin in Moscow, ending this edition of the Rachman Review. Thanks for joining me and I hope you'll be able to listen again next week.

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