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Open Russo-Ukrainian Conflict In the Making?

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

In recent days, speculation about a renewed and open military conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been making the rounds. That speculation is groundless.

COMMENTARY

SINCE LATE March 2021, media reports and some observers have postulated about the possibility of an open conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This follows the deaths of four Ukrainian soldiers in a battle against Russian-backed separatists in the Donetsk Region of eastern Ukraine; deployment of Russian forces on the border; and statements by Western and Russian officials in reaction.

President Joseph Biden expressed “unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia’s ongoing aggression in the Donbas and Crimea” to his Ukrainian counterpart, President Volodymyr Zelensky on 2 April. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson conveyed their concerns, similarly pledging their support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. A NATO spokesman conveyed the alliance’s support in the same vein while a Franco-German statement emphasised the same point.

NATO Membership for Ukraine?

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg repeated NATO’s stance during a call with President Zelensky on 6 April. On his part, the Ukrainian leader, in a tweet after the call, stressed that Ukrainian membership of “NATO is the only way to end the war in Donbas. Ukraine’s MAP will be a real signal for Russia”.

His government has expressed the hope that Ukraine would be invited this year to join

NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is essentially a step designed for aspirants to NATO membership.

On Russia's part, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stressed that Russia was "moving troops within its own territory at its own discretion, and this shouldn't concern anyone".

Reacting to Zelensky's call for NATO MAP to be implemented, Peskov told reporters that NATO membership for Ukraine would not help it to resolve the separatist issue but "will only worsen the situation". Russia has been consistently arguing against NATO membership for Ukraine.

The Deputy Head of the presidential administration, Dmitri Kozak, said on 9 April that Moscow would defend the separatist regions. "Everything depends on the scale of the conflagration," adding that an escalation could mark the "beginning of the end" for Ukraine.

President Zelensky was at the frontline on 9 April as well, in what is seen as a morale-boosting visit. Nevertheless, a military clash between Russia and Ukraine is not imminent for the following reasons:

Russo-EU relations

Nord Stream 2

This gas pipeline project to Germany is crucial to Russia's gas sector as well as Russia's politico-strategic objectives in Europe. Opposed by the US and some EU countries, it is almost completed and despite long-standing US pressure, is still supported by Germany's leaders.

A Russian-Ukrainian war, irrespective of who makes the first move, would place the viability of the Nord Stream 2 project in dire straits, even after its completion. Should hostilities break out before its completion, that would drive the final nail into the coffin of the project.

Russian vaccine

The pandemic has brought both Russia and the EU to the realisation that cooperation is required to manage and eliminate it. To this end, the European Medicines Agency started a review of the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V, in March. Reportedly, supplies have already arrived in Hungary and Slovakia, with Austria currently engaged in talks for it as well.

Germany's health minister has also said Germany would be discussing with Russia the supply of the vaccine while the German state of Bavaria has reportedly placed advanced orders for it. There have also been reports that joint production in EU countries could begin, after the vaccine's registration.

Russia's vaccine acts not only as a source of revenue, but also as an extension of its "soft power" and might help ease tensions with the EU; however, a war with Ukraine

would lead to more strained relations with the EU and jeopardise its vaccine diplomacy.

Russo-US relations

Despite the Russian outcry over President Biden's "killer" remark about his Russian counterpart and the consequent recall of Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov to Moscow for consultations, Russo-US relations, while tense, have not totally broken down.

Climate conference

This fact is testified by President Vladimir Putin's reported acceptance of Biden's invitation to attend a live streamed Leaders' Summit on Climate that he will host on 22-23 April. President Xi Jinping and Putin are among 40 world leaders invited to this meeting.

Space cooperation

Russia extended a space cooperation agreement with the US on 3 April. The original cooperation agreement, signed in 1992 and extended four times previously, provided the basis for projects between NASA and Roskosmos.

Biden-Putin phone chat

President Biden spoke with President Putin on 13 April and "proposed a summit meeting in a third country in the coming months to discuss the full range of issues facing the US and Russia".

The US' latest sanctions on Russia covering the financial, economic and diplomatic sectors have cast a cloud on a possible summit but might act to deter Russian military action against Ukraine.

US/EU Support for Ukraine

In the face of the pandemic and their concomitant socio-economic and political challenges, the US or the EU cannot support to the hilt, any unprovoked Ukrainian military thrust into the separatist regions. Moreover, as long it is not a NATO member, Ukraine cannot reckon with full Western military assistance for any offensive military action against its separatist regions.

Ukraine itself has stated that it does not plan any offensive action, according to a statement released on 9 April by Ruslan Khomchak, chief of the general staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Geopolitical Considerations

The Russian military build-up is meant to show the flag to the Ukrainians as well as the West that Russian support for separatist regions remains strong.

However, Russian actions might lead to a situation it does not desire namely the introduction of Western military forces into Ukraine. NATO/US troops could be invited or be deployed into Ukraine during or after an open Russo-Ukrainian conflict – a prospect Russia would not relish. Hence, Russia is unlikely to provide the West with any reason to take such a step.

An open Russo-Ukrainian military conflict would mean the political danse macabre for Russo-Western relations. Unlike Georgia, Ukraine lies in a very strategic corner of Europe and such a conflict would bring home to the Europeans the immediate challenge that Russian military power poses to their security.

A full break with the West might also lead to Russia having no other choice but to finally and fully throw in its lot with China. Such a move would go against the prevailing grain of Russian strategic thought as it would mean a significant loss of Russian strategic manoeuvre and independence vis-à-vis China and the US.

Hence, President Putin will not make such an injudicious move against Ukraine.

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