



Let the games begin – in Ukraine

Putin withheld invasion during the Beijing Olympics hosted by his friend Xi but now that constraint is gone

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Let the games begin, and I don't mean the just-concluded Beijing Winter Olympics.

Rather, it's the pending Russian invasion of Ukraine and uncertain Western response. Putin was canny enough to withhold invasion during the winter sports festival hosted by his geopolitical friend Xi Jinping. But with the Olympic Games over, public relations problems with China are out of the way.

Nor did the United States and its NATO allies yet lay out how much they plan to punish Russia, economically and diplomatically, should Putin order his tanks into the former Soviet republic.

In any case, a noisy prelude is underway in breakaway eastern provinces. Putin on Monday recognized the self-declared independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, as Russia's parliament had asked him to do.

Meanwhile, in those same eastern provinces, Kremlin-supported ethnic Russian militias have been shelling Ukraine government forces huddled in trenches to the west.

Putin said Ukrainian artillery hit a school. Busloads of women and children have been ferried into Russia, leaving behind their pro-Russian kin to defend against a yet-imaginary Ukrainian onslaught.

Russia has closed in on Ukraine from the north and east as well as from Crimea in the south with 145,000 troops, outfitted with tanks and rockets and supported by jet bombers. Russia took Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, but hardly anyone talks about that now. Putin's warships patrol Ukraine's Black Sea coast.

US President Joe Biden and European allied leaders say Russia is poised to attack and they will punish Moscow with sanctions if it does. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky wants the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to announce specific punishments in advance.

He fears they might be too light, but NATO has demurred.

Putin's primary goal

Putin's primary goal is to ensure Ukraine never, ever joins NATO and to keep some sort of foothold in the country to prevent it from straying into the West's fold.

Western analysts outline all sorts of predictions of how far Russia will go. Putin might simply insert Russian forces inside the breakaway provinces.

More ambitiously, Russia could invade and occupy land from the eastern border to the Dnieper River, and even include the capital Kiev. The large chunk contains Ukraine's richest farmland.

It also includes territory along the Black Sea that would link the Crimean Peninsula, annexed by Russia back in 2014, to Russian territory by land. No one in the West seems to be talking about wresting Crimea from Russia's grasp.

Even more ambitiously and certainly messier, Putin could order the conquest of the whole country.

Any of these moves would ignite Cold War 2.0. Possible Western retaliatory measures include reduced oil purchases from Russia and cutting Moscow off from access to Western banking resources.

Putin can cut off European fuel supplies (hoping Chinese purchases might make up for the cut) and order up cyberattacks on western industries of the sort that Russia has already launched in the past.

Facing these threats and disruptions, just how resolute are the NATO allies in imposing harsh measures? In the past, interest in the fate of Ukraine has been tepid. In 2008, France, Germany and Italy scuttled a proposal by then-US president George Bush to offer Ukraine and Georgia eventual NATO membership.

Berlin in particular has regarded Russian dominance of the Slavic east with indifference.

Currently, French President Emmanuel Macron has negotiated with Putin in order to replace threats of war with talks. Sunday, Putin responded with bombast and charges that Ukrainian forces are terrorizing ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

His state television has highlighted busloads of forlorn women and children pulling into the Russian city of Rostov-na-Donu.

Lessons of the past

Germany is resisting calls by the US to keep closed the new Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, which is designed to both increase supplies of the fuel to Western Europe and bypass an existing route through Ukraine.

Both Germany and Italy purchase most of their natural gas from Russia and both, along with France, are lobbying hard for talks. Is this 2008 redux? While the West seems torn about how to respond, Putin appears guided by Soviet lessons of the past.

His negotiating style appears to have been borrowed from the late, long-time Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko, Estonia's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas told the Guardian. According to Kallas, Gromyko had "three basic rules of negotiating with the west."

“First, demand the maximum, do not meekly ask but demand,” Kallas said. “Second, present ultimatums. And third, do not give one inch of ground because there will always be someone in the West that will offer you something maybe half that you did not previously have.”

Kallas added with exasperation: “We are already discussing what we can offer to de-escalate, and if we do that the West will fall into their trap.”

Putin’s campaign to dominate Ukraine follows lessons gleaned from former KGB boss and, briefly, Soviet premier Yuri Andropov.

Andropov witnessed several attempts by Soviet satellites to escape rule by Moscow. In 1956, as ambassador to Budapest, he witnessed a revolt of Hungarians that was eventually crushed by Russian tanks.

As KGB head in 1968, he oversaw, in his words, “extreme measures,” to crush the pro-democracy Prague Spring uprising in what was then-Czechoslovakia.

Conversely, Andropov persuaded then-Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev against smashing the pro-democracy Solidarity movement in Poland, instead leaving the issues to the Communist government in Warsaw to fix.

Rebuilding the Russian empire

The Polish move to the West haunts Putin, as did his in-person witnessing, as a KGB agent, the fall of the Berlin wall. He wants to avoid a similar outcome in Kiev – a triumph of Western-style democracy and protection by NATO.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has warned that Putin “shows a determination to carry out the scenario of rebuilding the Russian empire. A scenario that we, all Poles, have to forcefully oppose.”

“This is a broader test for the West and much broader than just Ukraine. Putin only understands strength, and Russia’s goal has always been to divide the west, the EU and NATO,” insists Estonia’s Kallas.

Lithuania’s foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said flatly: “Ukraine is already under attack: economic, cyber, military.”

With these stakes outlined by some of NATO’s easternmost members, all eyes are on Biden. He was in the US Senate when George W Bush persuaded Georgia to take a tough line against Russia – only to do nothing when Moscow not only invaded in 2008, but annexed a piece of the country and protected another region as it broke away.

Biden was then-president Barack Obama’s vice-president when Russia invaded Crimea and eastern Ukraine and he witnessed the futility of Washington-led sanctions.

Some observers are skeptical he will do better than his predecessors. “The most likely outcome is a repetition of the Georgia episode, in which a country Washington encouraged to take a confrontational stand against Russia acts on an exaggerated assumption of US backing, suffers a decisive military defeat and is humiliated, while US leaders, for all their verbal posturing, prudently refrain from going to war,” said Ted Galen, an analyst at the Cato Institute in the US.

“The United States would come away looking both feckless and irresponsible.”

The Atlantic Council, an American foreign policy think tank, called the coming decision a possible “Munich Moment,” in reference to the 1938 agreement to cede part of Czechoslovakia to Hitler’s Germany, endorsed by the United Kingdom, France and Italy.

World War II followed three years later.