

BRIEF

WHEN RUSSIA WENT TO WAR

RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE
SERIES NO. 7

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On 24 February 2022, Russia went to war in Ukraine, the fourth time it has committed military forces to attain foreign policy objectives since 2008. Although there are many differences between the current conflict in Ukraine and the three previous wars, one distinction particularly stands out: in Georgia in 2008, and in Ukraine and Syria in 2014, Moscow's operations came in response to developing situations and perceived deteriorations in Russia's national interests. The current war is different. Russia's decision to go to war was not provoked by recent changes in its neighbourhood or by any conceivable near-term military threat. Moscow alone instigated hostilities and chose the time and place at which it would attack its neighbour. Russia's attack on Ukraine thus resembles more the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary in 1956 or the Warsaw Pact's attack on Czechoslovakia in 1968 than it does Russia's attacks on Georgia in 2008 or Ukraine in 2014.

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This brief will assess Russia's preparations for war in part through the prism of an analysis published by the author in 2020, which included a list of indicators of possible Russian intent to conduct large-scale combat operations against its Western neighbours.¹ However, it should be noted that this was intended as a list of indicators of a Russian attack on NATO countries. Although some markers still applied, Russia went to war against Ukraine with a different posture than it would adopt if it were to attack NATO.

EARLY INDICATORS

The first phase of Russia's preparations to attack Ukraine started almost a year before the outbreak of hostilities. In March 2021, the Russian Armed Forces began the largest deployment exercise in their history. Most combat units of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) were deployed from Siberia to a training range in Pogonovo, south of Voronezh. Simultaneously, near Novoozerne in Crimea, Russian units established an equipment storage area for units belonging to the 58th CAA, deployed from the eastern Caucasus. At the time, the goal of this exercise was not clear to Western observers, although Ukraine may have been a potential invasion target due to its perceived plans to retake the Donbas.

Between March and October 2021, no further build-up of Russian forces near Ukraine occurred. In September, Russia and Belarus organised their quadrennial Zapad command and staff exercise, but its focus was in Mulino, far away from Ukrainian borders. Some elements of the 41st CAA were redeployed from Pogonovo to Mulino, but no additional elements from Pogonovo or Novoozerne took part in Zapad. It is highly likely that at this time the Russian military had already developed plans for attacking Ukraine. Consequently, Zapad was probably used to improve interoperability between the Central Military District's 90th Tank Division and formations from the Western Military District, and cooperation between the Spetsnaz and airborne brigades that were deployed on 24 February to capture Hostomel airport on the outskirts of Kyiv.

In hindsight, another vital element of Russia's preparations for war occurred in August in the Southern Military District where formations

rehearsed a 'strategic operation', indicating that they too were gearing up for war.² Even so, the unusually high tempo of exercises across multiple training ranges in western and southern Russia did not indicate an imminent breakout of hostilities, as Russian forces were not yet prepositioned.

PREPOSITIONING

The next phase of Russia's preparations to attack Ukraine occurred between October and January. First, the 41st CAA was redeployed from Pogonovo to Yelnya, in the Smolensk Oblast, to make way for elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army that began arriving in November. Other units arrived to augment the Russian presence near Ukraine. A key indicator of the intent to start hostilities was the creation of a new motor rifle regiment in Valuyki, in the Belgorod Oblast, using equipment drawn from storage.³ In December, units of the 6th CAA began to arrive at training areas near Kursk and Russia's posture near Ukraine increasingly indicated belligerent and offensive intent. Before March 2021, Russia had only around 20-25 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG) stationed near Ukraine. By the end of January 2022, this had increased four or fivefold and was clearly not linked to any possible exercise.⁴

One of the most important aspects of Russia's war preparations was the 'Allied Resolve' exercise organised in Belarus and involving Russian units from the Eastern Military District. This drill followed the well-known but often misinterpreted and misunderstood concept of masking troop movements through a planned exercise. It was akin to the 1968 'Sumava' exercise conducted by the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia and neighbouring countries, which was supposed to practise repelling enemy aggression and then transitioning to an offensive to defeat opposing forces. In reality, Sumava allowed (much larger than previously agreed) Warsaw Pact forces to be introduced into Czechoslovakia and masked the deployment of Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops to its border. It was thus a deception which sought to sow confusion about the real goals of military movements throughout the entire bloc during the late spring and summer, ultimately allowing Warsaw Pact troops to unexpectedly invade Czechoslovakia on 20 August. The goals and

conduct of 'Allied Resolve' were the same: it did not introduce troops into Ukraine, but it did explain the introduction of Russian forces into Belarus.

By February, the build-up had been going on for almost a year. Consistent with its security doctrine, Russia neither explained this presence nor explicitly acknowledged that it was aimed at Ukraine (this lack of explanation is another recognised aspect of Russian war preparations). Russia now had some 100-120 BTG near Ukraine, of which 20-25 were in Belarus. It was highly improbable that they were there to prepare for an exercise or as a test of the strategic mobility capability of the Russian Armed Forces.

POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS AS DECEPTION

Negotiations involving Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany continued throughout the military build-up. While some hoped that these negotiations could avert the war, it was clear that Ukraine and Russia's views and expectations were so divergent that no political settlement to satisfy both sides would be possible. Indeed, Moscow's demands were so unacceptable that it backed itself into a corner and would only be able to walk away empty-handed. These negotiations showed another aspect of Russian war preparations. Russia's participation in diplomatic discussions during its build-up of forces was not intended to avert war, but to buy time, divert attention from its military activity, and produce false hope that war was avoidable.

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Regarding Ukraine, this political deception was further boosted by Russia's calls for a peace process and peaceful solution, and for discussions on troop withdrawal. Just two days before Russia attacked, Putin continued to insist that he was open to finding a diplomatic solution.⁵ In fact, Russia had previously announced two troop withdrawals, although neither materialised (some formations may have been withdrawn but more units were added elsewhere, increasing Russia's overall presence near Ukraine). Moscow

presumably wanted to show that it was willing to make concessions and to ease tensions.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

It was challenging to track Russian troop movements in January due to the impact of bad weather on the availability of satellite imagery. Concurrently, the Russian security services attempted to block access to online services that provided data on trains and rail cars carrying military equipment. However, one image posted by Maxar Technologies Inc, a US-based space technology company, suggested that military personnel had started to arrive at equipment assembly areas at the end of January.⁶

By mid-February, Russian forces were leaving assembly areas and moving towards staging areas near the border.⁷ This included not only ground units equipped with tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, but also logistics, and combat and medical support units. At the same time, air presence near the border increased as Russia deployed rotary-wing assets to support ground operations. Together, these actions would allow Russia to attack at short notice.

Still, despite these movements, Moscow provided no political justification for an attack on Ukraine. This changed on 21 February when President Putin signed decrees that officially recognised the independence of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Simultaneously, he ordered the Russian Armed Forces to carry out 'peacekeeping functions' in these territories. The following day, Putin confirmed Russia's recognition of the DPR and LPR within the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, effectively putting Russia at war with Ukraine.⁸ On 23 February, Russian personnel were withdrawn from all diplomatic missions in Ukraine.⁹ At this stage, an attack was inevitable and imminent.

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In hindsight, Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February was predictable. Once new units started to arrive at assembly areas, it was clear that the build-up of Russian forces was not linked to any military exercise. Meanwhile, the scale of the build-up indicated that it could not

simply be an attempt to exert pressure on Kyiv. On the contrary, by mid-February all military indicators were flashing red, and by 23 February, political markers also suggested that war was unavoidable.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR NATO

The war in Ukraine has been accompanied by speculation that NATO countries might be next in line for Russia's attention. The preparations for a war against NATO, however, might follow a different pattern. First, Moscow probably involved every ground force unit at its disposal to attack Ukraine, necessitating a massive military movement operation lasting 11 months. It would be wrong to assume that every Russian military build-up would take this long. Moscow chose to extend this phase so that Russian posture changes near Ukraine were seen as incremental and slow, rather than massive and sudden, probably with the aim of lulling Ukraine and the West into a false sense of security. By contrast, deploying 70% of the Eastern Military District's land forces to Belarus took Russia only a month. Russia could probably deploy 100-120 BTGs close to NATO borders in two months. This would undoubtedly impact civilian rail traffic and the availability of trains and rail cars for private and state companies, but if this is not a concern, Russia can certainly move troops quickly in a specific operational direction.

Second, although Russia amassed 100-120 BTGs around Ukraine and committed most of these forces within the first couple of weeks, it may not do the same against NATO countries. Poor decisions by the Russian General Staff spread Russian forces along the entire border with Ukraine. In the case of the Baltic states or Poland, Russia would only have a few ingress points and could concentrate its forces on a small number of axes, echelon in-depth and maintain sizable reserves.

Third, any build-up near NATO borders would be evident from open sources. Today's highly digitised world, the widespread use of social media, and the availability of commercial satellite imagery would ensure that any large-scale movement of Russian forces towards NATO would be visible. In the case of Ukraine, the author provided an initial warning that a Russian attack on Ukraine

“is a real possibility” in late November and was able to analyse the entire Russian build-up until 23 February solely using data gathered from open sources. A surprise, large-scale, ground attack on NATO is improbable.

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Fourth, Russia is highly unlikely to attack NATO without a political justification. In other words, there would need to be a political crisis, and Russia would need to present demands that, if not met, would lead to the employment of military force.

In considering whether Russia or not will go to war, analysts should be particularly wary of mirror imaging, the cognitive bias that occurs when information is perceived and processed through the filter of personal experience. Mirror imaging happens when analysts assume that those they are studying think like they do themselves. The idea that a full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine would be ‘illogical’ is undoubtedly a sign of mirror imaging. It also reflects on a wider disbelief that a large-scale war could occur in Europe in the 21st century. But Russia did start such a war. And depending on how its war in Ukraine ends, Russia may be ready to attack other countries in the future.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Konrad Muzyka, “[When Russia Goes to War: Motives, Means and Indicators](#)”, International Centre for Defence and Security Analysis, January 2020.
- ² A strategic operation is a joint operation that integrates operational formations from different branches and arms to project power across the theatre of military action with the intent of attaining strategic effects. Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Dmitry Gorenburg, Mary Chesnut, Jeffrey Edmonds, and Julian Waller, “[Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts](#)”, Center for Naval Analyses, August 2021, 4.
- ³ Konrad Muzyka, “[The build-up](#)”, Rochan Consulting, 24 November 2021.
- ⁴ The author counted around 98 BTGs deployed to Ukraine by February 2022, but the actual number was undoubtedly higher. Konrad Muzyka, “[Tracking Russian deployments near Ukraine – Autumn-Winter 2021-22](#)”, Rochan Consulting, February 2022.
- ⁵ AFP News Agency, [Twitter post](#), 23 February 2022.
- ⁶ Konrad Muzyka, [Twitter post](#), 20 January 2022.
- ⁷ Conflict Intelligence Team, [Twitter post](#), 13 February 2022.
- ⁸ “[Как отличаются заявленные и фактические границы ДНР и ЛНР. Карта \[How do the declared and actual borders of the DPR and LPR differ. Map\]](#)”, RBC, 22 February 2022. Ukraine responded by announcing the conscription of reservists, but general mobilisation was ruled out: Natalia Zinets and Matthias Williams, “[Ukrainian president drafts reservists but rules out general mobilisation for now](#),” Reuters, 22 February 2022.
- ⁹ Russia had been withdrawing diplomatic personnel from Kyiv for weeks, coupled in some instances by the burning of documents on embassy territory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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