

Ukraine-Russia War

Introduction

Since Ukraine achieved independence in 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, it has gradually veered to the West - both the EU and Nato.

Russia's leader aims to reverse that, seeing the fall of the Soviet Union as the "disintegration of historical Russia".

He has claimed Russians and Ukrainians are one people. "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood," he asserted, denying Ukraine its history.

In 2013 he pressed Ukraine's pro-Russian leader, Viktor Yanukovich, not to sign a deal with the European Union, prompting protests that ultimately ousted the Ukrainian in February 2014.

Russia retaliated in 2014 by seizing Ukraine's southern region of Crimea and triggering a rebellion in the east, backing separatists who have fought Ukrainian forces in an eight-year war that has claimed 14,000 lives.

There was a ceasefire, and a 2015 Minsk peace deal that was never implemented. Just before his invasion, President Putin tore up the peace agreement and recognised two Russian-backed statelets as independent from Ukraine.

As he sent in the troops, he accused Nato of threatening "our historic future as a nation", claiming without foundation that Nato countries wanted to bring war to Crimea.



Crisis in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine



Ukraine-Russia Conflict

What Russia Wants?

The goals set at the start of Russia's invasion appear to have been watered down during the course of a war that he assumed would be swiftly won. Russia could not even admit it was an invasion or a war, preferring the fiction of a "special military operation".

But what is clear is that Russia sees this as a pivotal moment in Russian history. "Russia's future and its future place in the world are at stake," says foreign intelligence chief Sergei Naryshkin.

The Russian leader's initial aim was to overrun Ukraine and depose its government, ending for good its desire to join the Western defensive alliance Nato.

Russia told the Russian people his goal was to "demilitarise and de-Nazify Ukraine", to protect people subjected to what Russia called eight years of bullying and genocide by Ukraine's government. "It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force," Russia insisted.

But there were no Nazis and no genocide, and Russia has imposed brutal force on dozens of towns and cities and united Ukrainians in opposition to its occupation.

The bombardment continues - but latest reports from peace talks suggest Russia is no longer seeking to overthrow the government and is instead aiming for a neutral Ukraine.

Russia presented NATO and the United States in December with a set of written demands that it said were needed to ensure its security. Foremost among them are a guarantee that Ukraine would never join NATO, that NATO draw down its forces in the Eastern European countries that have already joined, and that the 2015 cease-fire in Ukraine be implemented – though Moscow and Kyiv disagree sharply on what that would mean.

The West dismissed the main demands out of hand. Moscow's aggressive posture has also inflamed Ukrainian nationalism, with citizen militias preparing for a drawn-out guerrilla campaign in the event of a Russian occupation.

At stake for Europe...

At stake for Europe is the security structure that has helped keep the peace on the continent since World War II. Europeans were initially divided over how to respond to various forms of Russian aggression, and the conflict laid bare the fractures within the European Union and NATO. But outrage over Mr. Putin's aggression has helped foster a unified front, and the E.U. unveiled penalties that they described as unprecedented for the bloc in terms of scale and reach. The foreign assets of wealthy individuals and businesses allied with the Kremlin have been frozen.

Europe has important trade ties with Russia, and stands to lose far more than the United States from sanctions. It is also dependent on Russian gas supplies, a weakness that Mr. Putin has exploited in past disputes.

Europe lost an invaluable negotiator with Moscow after the departure of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who grew up in the east, speaks fluent Russian, and had developed a good working relationship with the Russian president. Her successor Olaf Scholz, has tried to take on a leadership role in the crisis, halting certification of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline that would link his country with Russia — one of the strongest moves yet by the West to punish the Kremlin.



United States response

In early December, President Biden made clear that his administration was not considering sending troops to fight for Ukraine since, among other reasons, Ukraine is not a member of the NATO alliance and does not come under its commitment to collective defense.

Instead, the United States has sent anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons to Ukraine, increased the American military presence in NATO countries bordering Russia, and ordered an additional 7,000 troops to Europe. The Pentagon also ordered the deployment of an armored brigade combat team to Germany to reassure skittish NATO allies in Eastern Europe. Administration officials also warned that the United States could throw its weight behind an Ukrainian insurgency.

But the real cudgel is financial.

Mr. Biden, vowing to turn Mr. Putin into a “pariah,” has announced tough sanctions aimed at cutting off Russia's largest banks and some oligarchs, from much of the global financial system and preventing the country from importing American technology critical to its defense, aerospace and maritime industries. Mr. Biden has also prohibited energy imports from Russia to the United States and issued sanctions against the company behind an energy pipeline connecting Russia to Germany.

Mr. Biden said the United States was freezing trillions of dollars in Russian assets, including the funds controlled by Russian elites and their families.

Western governments have also vowed to freeze assets belonging to Mr. Putin, but very little is known about what he owns and where it might be. The Biden administration could also institute sanctions that could deprive Russians of their beloved next-generation phones, laptops and other gadgets.

U.S. and European financial penalties and restrictions are throttling banks and other businesses in Russia, limiting the Russian government's ability to use its enormous foreign currency reserves, and impeding millions of Russians from using their credit cards, accessing their bank deposits or traveling abroad.



Is there a way out of this war?

Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak believes a ceasefire could start in the coming days because Russian forces are stuck in their current positions.

Both sides have spoken positively of progress in negotiations, and Mr Podolyak says Russia's president has softened his demands.

At the start of the war, the Russian leader wanted Ukraine to recognise Crimea as part of Russia and to recognise the independence of the separatist-run east. Ukraine would have to change its constitution to guarantee it would not join Nato and the EU.

The future status of Crimea and the Russian-backed statelets in Luhansk and Donetsk is still far from being resolved, but they may not be a deal-breaker if the two sides agree to address that issue at a later date.

Russia does appear to have accepted it cannot depose Ukraine's leadership and replace it with a puppet government, as exists in Belarus. President Volodymyr Zelensky said at the start of the war he had been warned "the enemy has designated me as target number one; my family is target number two".

"It feels like [Putin] will have to accept a much more limited list," says Tatiana Stanovaya, of analysis firm RPolitik and the Carnegie Moscow Center.

That is because Russia is considering a "neutral, demilitarised" Ukraine with its own army and navy, along the lines of Austria or Sweden, which are both EU members. Austria is neutral, but Sweden is not. In fact it is non-aligned and takes part in Nato exercises.

Not everyone is convinced Russia is negotiating in good faith. France's foreign minister says Moscow should declare a ceasefire first, because you do not hold talks "with a gun to your head".