

The Russian troops at the Ukraine border are part of a larger ploy

What can the US do to change Putin's political calculus?

From the Editors in the [December 29, 2021](#) issue



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In the last month, Russia has placed at least 100,000 troops near its border with Ukraine. NATO has called the buildup “unprovoked and unexplained,” but for Ukrainians few explanations are needed. They watched Russia annex the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 when it gambled, correctly, that Europe and the United States would do nothing in response. They’ve been fighting Russian-funded separatists in the Donbas region since 2014 and absorbing refugees from the war zone into Ukrainian society. During the first impeachment trial of Donald Trump, Americans saw how callously the former president sought to use Ukraine’s vulnerability for political gain.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin has also been involved in the movement of Iranian refugees to the Belarus-Poland border. While it claims that these movements of troops and

refugees are unrelated, few in the region are convinced. The Kremlin's aim is to destabilize Ukraine while also destabilizing the borders of the European Union, to punish those it sees as preventing Russia from accomplishing its objectives in the region. It also seeks to increase the political and financial cost of NATO support for Ukraine.

Russia is counting on internal social divisions to weaken Ukrainian resolve. But most Ukrainians want closer ties with Europe. They want what US diplomat Daniel Fried calls "prompt solidarity." Ukraine, a fragile democracy, has been working hard to attain the anti-corruption standards required to become an EU member. Such reforms are difficult in a country where corruption is deeply entrenched.

Ukraine needs support and security in the short and long terms. There is much the US can do to change Russian president Vladimir Putin's political calculus. It can strengthen its partnership with Europe by coordinating both messaging and actions. It can intensify economic sanctions on Russia. European nations, especially Germany, have recently increased their dependence on Russian oil, and this has weakened Europe's position vis-à-vis Ukraine. Still, the US will need to work with Europe in order to put pressure on Russian banks and energy producers. This should include sanctions on individual Russian oligarchs, which will increase pressure on Putin personally.

Together the US and Europe can create a huge economic price for Russian interference in Ukraine. The US could also suspend or downgrade talks with Russia on strategic stability and cyber security.

The problem is that NATO and US support generally comes part and parcel with militarization. Ukraine needs resources and support. But many who advocate for such support maintain the mentality that security is achieved through an arms race. There are many ways to support Ukraine without adding to the region's guns, missiles, and tanks. Ukraine needs infrastructure, civil society, and economic and intelligence support. If the end goal is a free and democratic Ukraine with close ties to Europe, a militarized Ukraine does not help.

Providing arms is a cold war habit that is hard to break. What's needed instead is the sort of support that will nurture an economically strong, democratic Ukraine—a prospect that will be good for the entire region and for the United States as well.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A fragile democracy.”