Tit-for-tat escalation in the Crimea crisis: where will it end?

By Ian Davis, NATO Watch

Introduction

President Vladimir Putin put the annexation of Crimea on a fast track yesterday, ordering the drafting of an accession agreement between Crimea and Russia. On 17 March he laid the groundwork by [signing a decree](#) formally recognizing Crimea as a "sovereign and independent state". A few hours earlier the United States and the EU had imposed financial sanctions against Moscow, while NATO described the referendum in Crimea as "illegal and illegitimate". Crimean authorities say 96.8 percent of voters supported the referendum to join Russia, but many ethnic Ukrainians and Muslim Tatars are thought to have boycotted the vote.

Earlier in the weekend, the Russian government vetoed a US-backed Security Council resolution declaring the referendum invalid, while Russian forces were also accused of seizing a natural gas terminal in Ukraine, just outside Crimea's regional border. While Moscow is reported to have agreed to refrain until 21 March from taking over Ukrainian bases in Crimea by force (following a [ceasefire declaration with Ukraine](#) on 16 March), Russia's military occupation of the Crimea Peninsula has brought East-West tensions to one of their most dangerous points since the end of the Soviet Union. In the past two weeks the conflict has escalated on three levels: political, military and cyber, as outlined below.

Political escalation

In a welcome bid to defuse tension, Ukraine's new government [pledged](#) on 18 March that the country would not join NATO and would take steps to improve ties with Moscow, while also stating that "Ukraine and the entire civilized world will never recognize the illegitimate declaration of independence of Crimea and its violent renunciation of the territory of our country", according to a statement by the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry. Similarly, Ukrainian's interim Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk speaking on national television said that "Despite the armed aggression of Russia against Ukraine, I will do everything possible not only to keep the peace but also to build a genuine partnership with Russia and good neighbor relations".

But he also warned that the government would take new steps to try to maintain the peace. In addition to an earlier partial mobilisation of thousands of reservists (see below), the interior ministry was now tasked with seizing all unregistered weapons. "We have to stabilize the situation in the country as soon as possible," he said. (On the 14 March, former Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk had [said](#) that Ukraine ought to consider joining NATO. But according to [polling research](#) by Gallup most Ukrainians have never warmed to the idea of NATO membership).

However, many Western and Russian leaders and political commentators have spent the past week ratcheting up the rhetoric. During a visit to Poland on 18 March, [US Vice President Joe Biden](#)

denounced the Crimea annexation as "an almost unbelievable set of events" and "nothing more than a land grab" by Moscow. In his latest statement (18 March), NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen also condemned Russia's move to annex Ukraine's Crimea region, saying Moscow had embarked on a "dangerous path". "I condemn president Putin's announcement of new laws incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation", Rasmussen said, adding there "can be no justification to continue on this course of action that can only deepen Russia's international isolation".

NATO ambassadors in a statement on 17 March described the referendum in Crimea as "illegal" and "illegitimate", adding that it violated the Ukrainian Constitution and international law. "The circumstances under which it was held were deeply flawed and therefore unacceptable," the NATO statement said and urged Russia to de-escalate the situation, including by ceasing all military activities against Ukraine. "The so-called referendum undermines efforts to find a political solution to the crisis in Ukraine," said the statement. The ambassadors called on Russia to honour all its international commitments, return to the path of dialogue and seek a peaceful, political solution, including through direct dialogue with the government of Ukraine. "We therefore urge the Russian Federation not to take any steps to annex Crimea, which would be a clear violation of the United Nations Charter," added the statement.

At a meeting in Brussels on the same, Anders Fogh Rasmussen discussed the latest developments in Ukraine with Andriy Deshchytsya, Ukraine's acting Foreign Minister. In a subsequent NATO News Release similar language was used to decry the "so-called referendum" that "undermined international efforts to find a peaceful and political solution to the Ukraine crisis and violated the Ukrainian constitution and international law". The Secretary General also reiterated the Alliance's firm commitment to support Ukrainian sovereignty and independence, and the territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine's frontiers. The two also discussed NATO's determination to boost cooperation with Ukraine through the NATO-Ukraine Commission.

The NATO's Secretary-General had previously condemned the planned referendum in a statement on 14 March, saying it would break international law and have no "political legitimacy". The statement was issued after a meeting at NATO headquarters of ambassadors from the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, a forum that includes the 28 NATO allies and 22 other countries from Europe and central Asia, including Russia and Ukraine. US-Russia talks on Ukraine held in London on the same day failed to ease tensions, as did a subsequent telephone conversation between presidents Obama and Putin. The US leader "reiterated that a diplomatic resolution cannot be achieved while Russian military forces continue their incursions into Ukrainian territory and that the large-scale Russian military exercises on Ukraine's borders only exacerbate the tension," a White House readout stated.

Meanwhile, other voices on both sides continued to up the ante. In a return to Cold War rhetoric, a Russian television anchor Dmitry Kiselyov made a clear nuclear war threat saying: "Russia is the only country in the world that is realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash". A delegation of US senators visiting Ukraine said that they would urge President Obama to send arms and other military supplies to Ukraine. The Ukrainian Army has only "a few thousand combat-ready troops," US Senator McCain said. "They would be overwhelmed by the Russians if it came to that. One of their urgent requests is to have us supply them with weapons. I'll be urging our administration to arrange for that as quickly as possible".

Kurt Volker, a former US Permanent Representative to NATO, has called for a more robust response by allies that would "shift the logic of NATO action, from partnership to defence and deterrence". And the leader of Crimea's Tatars, Mustafa Cemilev, was reported as calling for NATO intervention to avert a "massacre".

Finally, in the latest diplomatic tit-for-tat, following the Obama Administration's announcement on 17 March that seven Russian officials and four Ukrainian officials would be barred from holding assets or travelling to the United States, Putin appears set to respond with his own list of targeted sanctions. Several US

Senators and officials are expected to be banned from visiting Russia.

Military escalation

Ukraine has ordered its troops in Crimea to use their weapons to protect themselves after a soldier was killed on 18 March when pro-Russian forces stormed a military base near Simferopol. "The conflict is shifting from a political to a military stage," said Arseniy Yatsenyuk at an emergency government meeting.

In the past two weeks there have been a series of moves and countermoves by Russia and NATO to beef up their military presence in Eastern Europe. NATO last week initiated reconnaissance flights over Romania and Poland to better monitor the security situation in Ukraine. Additional US F-16 planes were also deployed to Poland.

The Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko asked Moscow to deploy extra warplanes on its territory in response to the perceived NATO military buildup near Belarus' border. The Russian Defence Ministry agreed to deploy six fighter jets and three transport aircraft, *Russia Today* reported. According to previous military agreements, Russian and Belarusian troops can move freely throughout both countries. In addition, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Moscow-led security organization, announced that it was monitoring NATO's build-up. *"We are concerned with the deployment of a NATO aviation group near Belarus borders. We notice the increased surveillance activity near that region. But at the moment we believe that taking countermeasures would be premature,"* said Nikolay Bordyuzha, the Secretary General of the organization, which includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

On 13 March Moscow deployed troops and military equipment along Ukraine's eastern border, but the next day the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia does not have any imminent intention to invade eastern Ukraine, the *Associated Press* reported. German Chancellor Angela Merkel (among other Western leaders) strongly condemned this Russian troop deployment, saying that Moscow was risking a "catastrophe". Following the troop movements, Russia's senior commander, Valery V. Gerasimov,

spoke by telephone with his NATO counterpart, Gen. Knud Bartles of Denmark, the news agency *Interfax* reported, but the details of the conversation were not disclosed.

On 17 March the Ukrainian Parliament endorsed a presidential decree for a partial military mobilization to call up 40,000 reservists to counter Russia's military actions. And according to a report in *The Telegraph*, Poland is proposing to create a joint military brigade with Ukraine and Lithuania. Defence ministers of the three countries are due to meet this week to revisit the plan that was originally proposed in 2009. Some 1,600 Ukrainian troops served under Polish command during the Iraq war and Ukraine's forces also co-operated with Poles during the NATO-led peacekeeping operations in Kosovo.

It has also been reported that the Visegrad 4 (V4) group of countries - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia - signed a military pact on 14 March to coordinate defence planning and to create a joint combat unit to operate under NATO and EU auspices. However, the V4-EU combat unit of 3,000 soldiers is not expected to be ready to take part in NATO or EU operations until 2016. The V4 group was set up in 1991 as a forum for its members to discuss common security and energy issues, and the formation of a joint military unit has been under discussion for some time.

In addition, several of Russia's non-NATO neighbours (e.g. Sweden and Moldova) have also been reviewing their defences and making noises about closer cooperation with NATO.

Finally, according to the Army Times the US and NATO are set to continue with a planned "peacekeeping" military exercise in Ukraine in July, called Rapid Trident 2014. The exercise is due to take place near the Polish border, in Lviv, Ukraine, according to a US Air Force spokesman, and will include troops from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Canada, Georgia, Germany, Moldova, Poland, Romania, the United Kingdom and Ukraine. During last year's 2013 exercise, the practice drill took two weeks and included around 1,300 troops. It concentrated mainly on "airborne and air-mobile infantry operations".

Cyber escalation

Several [press reports](#) suggest that a virtual war is already underway in cyberspace, with computer attacks launched against several NATO websites in recent days. A group of pro-Russian Ukrainians is thought to have carried out a wave of low-level distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks on NATO websites, and the alliance's Estonia-based cyber defence "centre of excellence", on 15 March forcing them offline for a "few hours" and even into the early hours the following day. Using the name [CyberBerkut](#) ('Berkut' were the now disbanded riot squads used by the government of ousted pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich) the Ukrainian hackers slowed the NATO portals to a crawl and left them with intermittent availability, according to NATO spokeswoman, Oana Lungescu, on social networking site Twitter.

"[Several #NATO websites have been target of significant DDoS attack](#). No operational impact. Our experts working to restore normal function," Lungescu said on 15 March. "DDoS attack on some #NATO sites ongoing but most services restored. Integrity of NATO data & systems not affected. We continue working on it," was the follow-up the next day.

In addition, the website created by separatist groups in Crimea to monitor the referendum vote was blocked for an hour, with the pro-Russian government accusing hackers from an American university of being behind the attack.

In November 2013, a White House-Kremlin [cybersecurity crisis hotline](#) was established -- thus far, never used, according to US officials. The Ukrainian crisis is likely to complicate US-Russian bilateral relations on cybersecurity as well as many other issues.

NATO Watch Comment

In a recent BBC drama about the [37 days](#) that led up to the UK declaring war on Germany on 4 August 1914, the Prussian General Moltke was depicted as constantly urging the Kaiser to go to war. "There can't be a powerful Germany and a powerful Russia on the same continent," he said. The German generals thought it would take just six weeks to defeat France, but they had to go through Belgium, which in 1839 had been guaranteed neutrality.

The British Cabinet was divided and there were resignations following a comment: "How does an army of several million men defeat another army of several million men. It will be a war without victors".

This fictional account of the complex behind-closed-doors story of the final weeks before the outbreak of World War I questioned assumptions about the war's inevitability. It suggested that a combination of diplomatic mistakes and military misjudgments were at the heart of the catastrophic chain of events that led to neutral Belgium being invaded and the death of over ten million in the next four years. But as we approach the 100th anniversary of World War I, surely such mistakes and misjudgements are unlikely to be repeated today? Our digital, 24-hour social media age will uncover the truth and ensure that sanity prevails - right?

Well, try substituting the Crimea in 2014 for the Balkans in 1914. Replace the commitment to Belgian neutrality with a contemporary treaty guaranteeing Ukrainian security (the [1994 Budapest Memorandum](#)). And while no-one has so far explicitly said, "there can't be a powerful NATO and a powerful Russia on the same continent", this does appear to be the subtext of a number of the more belligerent voices on both sides. Add in the nuclear dimension and today's game of geopolitical chicken takes on an even more frightening tone.

Of course, words like 'accountability' and 'transparency' were not part of the story in 1914 and the respective Foreign Office officials and political elites were largely left to muddle through in their own way. It also meant that certain things were unseen and didn't come to light immediately, or could be hidden. None of that is true today. Or is it? Most foreign policy decisions and certainly those within NATO and Russia continue to be made behind closed doors. And it seems as if political machismo and misjudgements are just as likely to emerge in the current response to Crimea as they did in reaction to Sarajevo in 1914.

The power of the Western media to hold elected leaders to account and challenge 'official'

versions of events also appears limited. Most of the Western analysis and media coverage has sought to frame the conflict in Ukraine in terms of Putin and Russian aggression. There has been little effort to see the issue from the 'other side' (two notable exceptions are this blog by veteran UK news anchor John Snow and this op-ed in the *Washington Post* by Jack F. Matlock Jnr former US ambassador to the Soviet Union)**.** While it would be wrong to try and defend Putin's motives—the move into Crimea is undoubtedly an illegal, neo-imperialist act—it is certainly necessary to attempt to understand them if a peaceful resolution to this conflict is to be found.

The Russian establishment—the government, Kremlin and most foreign policy elites - have long seen NATO enlargement, which began about two decades ago, as part of a process by the United States and NATO allies to consolidate their post-Cold War gains at the expense of Russia's security. In turn, many within the US and NATO foreign policy and defence 'establishments' have underestimated how strategic Ukraine, and particularly Crimea, is to Russia. The port of Sevastopol has been the base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet since the 18th century and is a core strategic interest.

It would also be helpful to recognise that some of the worst aspects of Russian politics and foreign policy mirror those in Western societies. Russia may well be an oligarchic, class-ridden country in which the population is fed a diet of nationalism and militarism, but might the same also be said (to a lesser or greater extent) of the United States and some of its European allies? And if the illegal invasion of Crimea threatens the foundations of international order, is this any less so than the illegal invasion of Iraq and the continued violation of sovereignty through US drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen? And does anyone remember the *casus belli* for 'Operation Just Cause' in 1989? Was it to safeguard the lives of US citizens in Panama (the official line) or to protect US interests in the Panama Canal?

The territorial integrity of Ukraine, guaranteed 20 years ago by Russia, the US and Britain, has now been effectively destroyed and cannot conceivably be reversed by either diplomatic pressure or military force. However, it is possible to secure the political integrity of the rest of Ukraine. The best that can be hoped for is for the whole of Ukraine (minus Crimea) to participate in peaceful, free and fair presidential elections on 25 May and thereafter seek to unify an obviously divided country. The country's leadership will also need to redefine its relationship with the West and Russia and find a way to work with both.

In terms of NATO-Russian relations, it seems that a period of heightened tension is almost inevitable. There will be growing calls to bolster NATO's modest military measures announced so far, including the deployment of additional US missile defences and ground forces to Eastern Europe. But this is only likely to deepen the crisis and harden Putin's resolve. Needlessly provocative deployments will also do very little to enhance security in Eastern Europe. Instead, as counter-intuitively as it may seem, the West needs to reach out to Moscow and explore new ways to cooperate and normalise relations.