

The Return of US Leadership in Europe: Biden and the Russia Crisis

by Riccardo Alcaro

In dealing with Russia's aggressive policies towards Ukraine, US President Joe Biden has put up a powerful display of competent crisis management. While it may not be enough to stop President Vladimir Putin from escalating, Biden's policy has nonetheless re-affirmed US leadership in Europe.

Communication strategy

Starting last autumn, the Biden administration kept warning its European allies that Russia's military mobilisation on the Ukrainian border was large enough to make the prospect of an invasion technically possible.¹ US officials have since publicly denounced Russia's threatening tactics, even going as far as to accuse the Kremlin of planning false flag operations to give itself a pretext for an armed intervention.² President Biden himself

has said that he expects Putin to move in, although he (and everybody else) remains uncertain as to what form Russia's actions will take.³

The Biden administration's communication strategy is aimed at persuading European allies to close ranks while also preventing the Russian government from taking advantage of an information grey zone to spread fake news and foment confusion and divisions.⁴ In spite of Russia's insistence that it has no hostile intentions, there is little doubt that the risk of a renewed Russian intervention in Ukraine is higher than it has ever been since the

¹ Henry Foy, "US Intelligence-Sharing Convinces Allies of Russian Threat to Ukraine", in *Financial Times*, 5 December 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b287f2e3-3b8b-4095-b704-c255a943c84c>.

² Roman Olearchyk, Henry Foy and James

Politi, "US Accuses Russia of Planning 'False-Flag Operation' in Eastern Ukraine", in *Financial Times*, 14 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/ac431782-62c6-4f3a-a08e-d832fc4ac2a1>.

³ "Ukraine Tension: Biden Says He Thinks Putin Will 'Move In'", in *BBC News*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60061300>.

⁴ Henry Foy, "How the West Went Public to Stop a War in Ukraine", in *Financial Times*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3510f7cb-294f-4783-969b-34f391e73b66>.

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annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Diplomatic response

The Biden administration has rejected Russia's demands for – amongst other things – a written guarantee that NATO will not expand to include other former Soviet republics and massively reduce (actually, remove) its military deployments in central and Eastern Europe (else, Moscow has threatened unspecified “technical-military” actions).⁵

At the same time, Biden has agreed to open negotiations on European security, which has unfolded in three separate but related tracks: a bilateral US–Russia channel, a reactivated NATO–Russia Council, and the pan-European Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, so as to give all parties involved, starting with Ukraine, formal representation.⁶

After consulting with allies, the Biden administration has presented Russia

with a set of possible arrangements over arms control, missile deployments, military exercises, transparency and confidence-building measures as well as military-to-military contacts.⁷ While these are secondary issues for Putin, they are still of interest to Russia. Most importantly, they substantiate a US and NATO commitment to engage in a broad negotiation over European security and start reversing the trend in the abysmal state of West-Russia relations.

Diplomatic exchanges have thus far delivered no result. The US offer has disappointed the Russians, who insist that NATO's enlargement fundamentally undermines their national security. They have nonetheless accepted to keep talking, and the two sides have engaged in a back-and-forth exchange of written proposals for compromise.⁸ In the meantime, Russia's military mobilisation has continued unabated.⁹ President Biden, who has used two virtual summits to warn Putin about the terrible consequences of an intervention, has started preparing a multifaceted response.¹⁰

⁵ Max Seddon, Henry Foy and Aime Williams, “Russia Publishes ‘Red Line’ Security Demands for Nato and US”, in *Financial Times*, 17 December 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/493da5ea-6ef2-42cc-8be1-c725030cf839>; “Putin Warns of ‘Military-Technical’ Response to Western ‘Aggression’”, in *Moscow Times*, 21 December 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/21/putin-warns-of-military-technical-response-to-western-aggression-a75891>.

⁶ “Russia Downplays Threat to Ukraine in Talks with US”, in *BBC News*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-59945170>; “Deep Divides Remain After Russia-NATO Talks on Ukraine Crisis”, in *The New York Times*, 12 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/12/world/russia-ukraine-nato-us>; “No Breakthrough as OSCE-Russia Talks on Ukraine Conclude”, in *VOA News*, 13 January 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6395786.html>.

⁷ Quint Forgey, “U.S. Delivers Written Response to Russian Demands amid Ukraine Crisis”, in *Politico*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/01/26/us-russia-ukraine-written-response-00002414>.

⁸ Simon Lewis, “U.S. and Russia Agree to Keep Talking after Meeting on Ukraine”, in *Reuters*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/top-diplomats-us-russia-meet-geneva-soaring-ukraine-tensions-2022-01-21>.

⁹ Michael Schwartz and David E. Sanger, “Russia Thins Out Its Embassy in Ukraine, a Possible Clue to Putin's Next Move”, in *The New York Times*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/us/politics/russia-ukraine-kyiv-embassy.html>.

¹⁰ David E. Sanger and Michael Crowley,

Defence and deterrence

Biden has ruled out the use of US troops in defence of Ukraine, to which he has nonetheless pledged full political support and continued military assistance (the US has provided Ukraine with 2.5 billion US dollars' worth of military assets since 2014, 650 million in 2021 alone).¹¹ Meanwhile, the US has moved 3,000 troops from Germany to Poland and Romania and put further 8,500 soldiers on heightened alert for a possible deployment to central and eastern Europe.¹² Other NATO member states have followed suit. The United Kingdom has said it will commit more troops to the Baltic area, naval forces to the Black Sea, air patrolling of Bulgaria and Romania's airspace, as well as rocket systems to Estonia.¹³ France has offered to send troops to Romania, Denmark has deployed additional military aircraft to Lithuania and Spain has sent a frigate to the Black Sea.¹⁴ A number of

weapons systems would follow NATO and US soldiers, including air defences, artillery, armoured vehicles, warships and aircraft, thereby bolstering the few thousand troops NATO keeps in central and eastern Europe. Most likely, these deployments would lose their rotational nature and become fully permanent.

Economic retaliation

The policy area that has witnessed greater activism on the part of the United States has revolved around potential economic retaliation.¹⁵ The Biden administration has worked on a wide-ranging set of measures that would cut off foreign lending, ban sales of sovereign bonds and blacklist Russia's major financial institutions. It is reportedly also considering to ban the export to Russia of products containing US-made or US-designed semiconductors, which are the essential component of computers, smartphones and other electronic devices.¹⁶

"Greetings, Mr. President': Biden and Putin Hold 2-Hour Virtual Summit", in *The New York Times*, 7 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/us/politics/biden-putin-ukraine-summit.html>.

¹¹ Deepa Shivaram, "90 Tons of U.S. Military Aid Arrives in Ukraine as Border Tensions with Russia Rise", in *NPR*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.npr.org/1075064514>.

¹² Dan Lamothe et al., "Biden Dispatching Additional U.S. Troops to Eastern Europe", in *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/02/ukraine-russia-putin-military-nato/>; Barbara Starr and Jeremy Herb, "US Places Up to 8,500 Troops on Alert for Possible Deployment to Eastern Europe amid Russia Tensions", in *CNN*, 25 January 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/24/politics/biden-troops-europe>.

¹³ Emma Graham-Harrison, "UK Ready to Commit Extra Forces to Nato Allies as Russia Tension Mounts", in *The Guardian*, 29 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/kgxbe>.

¹⁴ Alexandra Brzozowski, Bogdan Neagu and

Mathieu Pollet, "French Troops in Romania a Bid to Clarify 'Misunderstandings'", in *Euractiv*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1701179>; "Denmark's F-16s to Deploy for Nato's eAP Mission in Lithuania", in *Airforce Technology*, 19 January 2022, <https://www.airforce-technology.com/?p=218715>; "Spain Sends Warships to Black Sea, Considers Sending Warplanes", in *Reuters*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/spain-sends-warships-black-sea-considers-sending-warplanes-2022-01-20>.

¹⁵ Colby Smith, Roman Olearchyk and Polina Ivanova, "US Finalises Sanctions against Russia over Ukraine Aggression", in *Financial Times*, 30 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/83c195a4-d973-4e87-913b-05da93f2ce67>.

¹⁶ Ellen Nakashima and Jeanee Whalen, "U.S. Threatens Use of Novel Export Control to Damage Russia's Strategic Industries If Moscow Invades Ukraine", in *The Washington Post*, 23 January 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost>.

The US administration has agreed with the UK government to target the assets (both financial and otherwise) of some of the most prominent Russian oligarchs as well as people belonging to Putin's inner circle.¹⁷ Further, it has coordinated with the European Union on a set of restrictions that would strengthen the financial sanctions and ban the export of technologies for critical industry, most notably for the development of new gas projects.¹⁸ Even though it has so far ruled out an embargo on energy imports from Russia, the Biden administration has extracted from Germany a pledge to put the activation of Nord Stream 2, the controversial Russian-German gas pipeline under the Baltic, indefinitely on hold.¹⁹

Sustainability and effectiveness problems

The Biden administration aims to raise the costs for Russia of any intervention

[com/national-security/2022/01/23/russia-ukraine-sanctions-export-controls](https://www.national-security.gov/2022/01/23/russia-ukraine-sanctions-export-controls).

¹⁷ James Politi, "US Plans Sanctions against Putin's Inner Circle in Case of Attack on Ukraine", in *Financial Times*, 31 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/baa50a17-5f6b-47f3-8b79-5667ec6d78ac>.

¹⁸ Philip Blenkinsop, Gabriela Baczynska and Robin Emmott, "EU Leaders Agree on New Sanctions with U.S. if Russia Invades Ukraine", in *Reuters*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/eu-leaders-consider-new-sanctions-against-russian-surprises-2021-12-16>; Henry Foy et al., "New Russian Gas Projects Face Sanctions if Ukraine Attacked", in *Financial Times*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/8415b367-76e8-43f1-b99a-a69e896e60a2>.

¹⁹ Georgi Gotev, "Germany Agrees to Axe Nord Stream 2 if Russia Invades Ukraine", in *Euractiv*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1704361>.

against Ukraine, while also trying to promote a diplomatic way out of the crisis. It remains unclear whether Putin might be content with the high-level security dialogue the US is offering. It is also uncertain whether anything the US and its allies have put on the table may be enough to dissuade Putin from "moving in", not least because the Russian president can pick amongst multiple options.²⁰ These span a large-scale invasion, a further militarisation and de facto integration of Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukraine's eastern regions in which Russia has supported separatist movements since 2014, and a number of hybrid actions, including the intensification of the ongoing cyberattacks against Ukraine.²¹

A large-scale attack would make it easier for Biden to keep the cohesion of the Atlantic front, but would create problems of sustainability.²² Energy prices would likely spiral, thus prolonging the inflationary wave that has been mounting since last year (especially in the United States). Sanctions would wreak havoc on Russia's economy, but would most likely inflict a heavy cost on Europe too, especially Germany and Italy (the EU's first and third largest economies

²⁰ Dan Sabbagh, "What Would Be Russia's Military Options in Ukraine?", in *The Guardian*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/k8p46>.

²¹ Patrick Howell O'Neill, "How a Russian Cyberwar in Ukraine Could Ripple Out Globally", in *MIT Technology Review*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/01/21/1043980>.

²² Michael Crowley and Edward Wong, "U.S. Sanctions Aimed at Russia Could Take a Wide Toll", in *The New York Times*, 29 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/29/us/politics/russia-sanctions-economy.html>.

respectively), at a time of sustained but uncertain post-Covid recovery.

A more limited intervention by Russia would engender an equal and opposite problem, whereby effectiveness could be sacrificed on the altar of sustainability. Western countries hold different views of what the minimum threshold is for them to be willing to absorb the economic pain that comes with the imposition of sanctions on Russia.²³ The measures they could agree upon would therefore be sustainable over time, but would hardly be as tough as the most strident critics of Putin deem necessary.

Biden's response has yet to pass the test of Russia's intervening in Ukraine, if that indeed comes about. However, his administration has laid solid foundations for continued and intense transatlantic security dialogue. This is all the more important given that the European Union has provided no alternative to France and Germany's attempt to have a separate dialogue with Moscow.²⁴ Yet the French have admitted that this diplomatic channel is complementary, rather than conflicting, with the transatlantic one.²⁵

²³ Associated Press, "Minor Incursion' into Ukraine by Russia Could Complicate West's Response", in *VOA News*, 22 January 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6407951.html>.

²⁴ Clara Bauer-Babef and Julia Dahm, "Macron and Scholz Pledge to Not Give Up Dialogue with Russia", in *Euractiv*, 26 January 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1703136>.

²⁵ Henry Foy, Victor Mallet and Mehreen Khan, "Paris and Brussels Reassure US after Macron's Call for EU-Russia Talks", in *Financial Times*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/00308154-fd68-4ffe-8abf-4ea8493082cd>.

In conclusion, the Biden administration has skilfully used or threatened to use intelligence, diplomatic, defence, deterrence and economic assets to face Russia's challenge to Europe's security. Most notably, it has consulted extensively with allies, showing regard for their specific sensitivities while organising a coordinated response.²⁶ With the spectre of interstate war looming on the continent, history has indeed come back to Europe. With the Biden administration, so has US leadership.

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²⁶ White House, *Fact Sheet: U.S. Diplomatic Engagement with European Allies and Partners Ahead of Talks with Russia*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/10/fact-sheet-u-s-diplomatic-engagement-with-european-allies-and-partners-ahead-of-talks-with-russia>.

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