

"On s'engage, et puis on voit" – loosely translated as "one jumps into the fray and then decides what to do next" is a sentence attributed to Napoleon, but also sometimes to Lenin. It is a good description of the way President Putin is acting in the biggest crisis between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War, a crisis that temporarily brings Europe back at the center of global strategic competition at a time when the United States would like to focus on the China challenge.

The sentence is not an invitation to recklessness, the way it appears to be, but a description of a smart tactic: you make a bold move that forces your adversary to show his hand, and then you are in a better position to play your own cards. That is exactly what Putin did when on December 16, 2021, he published two draft treaties – one with the US, one with NATO countries and accompanied that initiative with the deployment of some 100,000 troops around Ukraine, including in Belarus.

The two draft treaties – in themselves an unusual way to start a negotiation – are for the most part nonstarters: not only do they forbid any future enlargement of NATO, but they roll back all the changes that have occurred since May 27, 1997, when NATO and Russia signed the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security. All military infrastructures, deployments and rotations of troops agreed between NATO members since the Founding Act would be dismantled or prohibited, and the steps taken by NATO after the invasion of Crimea would be reversed. Under the draft treaties, NATO would in effect be severely constrained from providing security to the 14 Central and Eastern European countries that joined it after 1997. As for nuclear weapons, the Russian proposal goes significantly beyond the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty ("INF Treaty") that prohibited deployment of intermediate nuclear forces in Europe (and from which the US was the first to withdraw, alleging Russian violations). It requires the US and Russia to commit to not deploying any nuclear weapons outside their respective territories, in effect weakening the nuclear linkage between the US and Europe that is at the heart of the NATO alliance.

Such maximalist demands could be taken as the opening move for a negotiation. However, the credibility of a serious negotiation on the part of the Russians is undermined by the fact that Russia bears a large responsibility in the dismantling or non-implementation of many of the agreements that contributed to European security: the original Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and its 1999 adaptation to the post-Cold War environment which put ceilings on military deployments, and the 1990 "Vienna Document" and its adaptations, which provide for exchanges of military related information, and the above mentioned INF treaty.

And even more importantly, the manner in which the proposals have been made, with the accompanying massive military deployments, can only be interpreted as blackmail. Russia continues to send mixed messages, claiming that it has no intention of invading Ukraine, but threatening unspecified "military-technical measures" if its demands are not met quickly. The manner in which Russia has publicized its red lines makes it difficult for Putin to back down.

What then could be the next move for Russia?

The strategic goals of Russia are hiding in plain sight. Russia, contrary to the Soviet Union, which benefited from the status quo in Europe, is a revisionist power. Putin believes that the West used a moment of extreme weakness in Russia to create a situation that is detrimental to its interests. It does not matter that no country has aggressive intentions vis-a-vis a nuclear-armed Russia, or that the NATO countries on its borders (Norway, Estonia, Latvia, and Poland and Lithuania because of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad) are no threat to Russia. Russia's vision of security – like most great military powers – is asymmetrical: it would like its neighbors to be at best vassal states, at a minimum neutral. It would also like to weaken the transatlantic link of Europe with the US without triggering the emergence of a stronger European Union – which it actively tries to

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weaken by supporting extreme right anti-European parties. Ukraine is a special case. In a long article published in July 2021, Putin presents an ethno-nationalist vision of Russia, adding an emotional dimension to the strategic picture: Belarus, Ukraine and Russia may be three separate countries, but they are linked by their common origin in "Rus", and any attempt to create new divides is for Putin an attempt to weaken Russia itself.

The strategic vision of Putin is not new, and its first expression can be traced back to the speech he made at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. Why then is he acting on it now, 15 years later? There may not be a single factor, but rather a combination. He may have concluded from his meeting with Biden that he has in front of him a weak president, as Khrushchev concluded – wrongly – after he met with Kennedy in Vienna. At a more strategic level, he may believe that the new American focus on China means that the last thing an American president wants is a European distraction. He may also believe that the window to create irreversible facts on the ground that would preclude any further estrangement between Ukraine and Russia is closing: if he doesn't act decisively, a weak Ukraine will inevitably fall into the western orbit. Lastly, he may think that Russia is now in a good position to contain likely economic sanctions if it acts, and to weather the resulting shock. As noted by Adam Tooze, with oil prices at US\$85, Russia, as a petrostate, is in a strong position: its budget balances at a price of \$44 and its central bank has accumulated some of the largest reserves in the world – close to US\$600 billion.

Meanwhile, the response to Putin's bold move of last December reveals the weaknesses of the West. Europe's trade with Russia is six times bigger than US' trade with Russia, and a big part of it is gas. The energy market is particularly tight this winter in Europe, and there is a palpable difference of perspective between the US and Europe on sanctions. There are also significant differences among the Europeans themselves on how to respond to the Russian challenge, reflecting different levels of dependence on Russian gas and different perceptions of the Russian threat. While the European Union is unhappy that it is not part of the US-Russia discussion, it is not at the moment capable of developing a clear common position vis-a-vis Russia. The position of the new German government is ambiguous, with the SPD chancellor taking a more conciliatory position with Russia than the Green Party foreign minister. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would allow Russia to circumvent Ukraine, remains an unresolved issue.

All this suggests that a Russian military operation against Ukraine is a real possibility. The best argument against this view is that, even if Putin is right in his assumption of a weak western response, it would most likely have a disastrous outcome for all those directly involved including Russia, but not for China. Even if Russia were able to limit the scope and impact of western sanctions, its economy would likely suffer, and Russian dependency on China would increase.

On the military side, while Russia could try to engineer regime change in Kyiv through a quick and surgical operation that would avoid the risks associated with a long-term occupation, it would find itself having to support a regime whose population, except in Eastern Ukraine, is increasingly anti-Russian. And if it limited its military operation to the eastern part, for instance connecting Donetsk and Luhansk with Crimea through Mariupol, it would solidify the anti-Russian posture in Kyiv, further alienating Ukraine from Russia.

The Europeans would try to limit the repercussions of sanctions on their economy, but the combination of high energy prices and an uncertain economic outlook would be particularly damaging as European economies try to emerge from COVID. Europeans would likely disagree on how to absorb a new flow of refugees, that Russia would try to weaponize. Politically, an open war would exacerbate differences among Europeans, weakening the European Union.

The US would be less directly affected, but the transatlantic link would be weakened. The engagement with Russia on strategic arms control would become problematic, and the crisis would inevitably make it more difficult for the US to prioritize focusing on China. For the Biden administration, it would be a no-win situation: the Republicans would alternatively accuse Biden of being a weak president or of dragging the US into a conflict that is not a key US strategic interest.

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In the end, only China, with a distracted US, a weaker Europe and a more dependent Russia, would benefit.

Will that be enough to convince the key protagonists that a hot war must be avoided? The paradox of the situation is that the most strident demand of Russia – a formal commitment to no further enlargement of NATO, especially with Ukraine, is at the moment a theoretical issue. There is no appetite in NATO for accepting new members, but NATO members take the principled position that every country has the sovereign right to apply to the alliance of its choice. That principled position, combined with the fact that Ukraine will not want to do what Austria did in 1955, when it issued a unilateral declaration of neutrality, makes any agreement with Russia on a European security architecture very unlikely.

Under such difficult circumstances, the best chance of avoiding a conflict is muddling through a protracted crisis: Russia could take some “military-technical measures” that may well surprise the West, but would stop short of a military attack on Ukraine. The fact that at the last meeting between Blinken and Lavrov, on Friday January 21, an agreement was reached on the possibility of further meetings may point in that direction. Over time, negotiations could lead to a carefully worded de facto moratorium on enlargement of NATO, coupled with confidence building measures limiting military deployments. There would not be an agreement on a European security architecture.

However, negotiations on a framework of agreed rules and procedures that would limit the risk of military confrontation and the competition for Ukraine would continue, but the threat of a major war would have been removed. Discussions on the status of eastern Ukraine would resume, possibly in an expanded “Normandy format” (Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany met in Normandy to discuss the situation in Ukraine following the eruption of conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Discussions reached an impasse, and it has been suggested that the US should now join). On the other hand, a more pessimistic interpretation of the continued US/Russia conversations cannot be excluded, i.e., that they are only a smokescreen to help Russia preserve an element of tactical surprise if and when it launches military operations.

Whatever happens, the outcome of the crisis is likely to shape the relationship of the West with Russia for years to come.



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