

What to Watch for as the Russia-Ukraine Conflict Escalates



The Russia-Ukraine conflict entered a new stage on Feb. 21 after Russia moved to end the Minsk peace deal by formally recognizing eastern Ukraine's two separatist republics as independent states. In response, the West has announced the first round of economic sanctions against Moscow over the crisis. **With the prospect of Russian troops crossing into Ukrainian-controlled territory now a distinct possibility, the potential escalation or de-escalation of the conflict will hinge on the evolution of the following developments in the coming days:**

.. 1) The Donbas conflict

On Feb. 22, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Moscow's recognition of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region goes beyond the territories that the rebels currently control and includes their claims over the rest of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, which are currently controlled by Ukraine. This position is meant to preserve the threat of a further invasion of Ukraine in the near future, as Moscow could use claims of defending the territorial integrity of its proxy states to launch an invasion of more Ukrainian territory inside Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, or even beyond them. In gauging whether the conflict will escalate, it will thus be key to monitor the current situation on the frontline in Donbas, as signs of renewed fighting or reported deaths of Russian citizens and/or service members there could serve as the grounds for a Russian "peace enforcement" operation to destroy Ukrainian military units and secure the Donbas or large pieces of Ukraine.

In a televised speech on Ukraine delivered on Feb. 21, Putin appeared to suggest the Ukrainian government hold talks with separatists regarding the border claims, noting "that all the difficult questions will be solved during negotiations between the current Kyiv government and the leadership of this government." This suggestion inflamed concerns of an imminent Russian military operation deep into Ukraine, as such talks would likely only take place after Moscow attempts to restore the republics' claimed borders. This ambiguity is meant to keep the door open to further incursions into Russian territory while also preventing the implementation of particularly tough sanctions against Russia. Moreover, Russia's authorization for the deployment of forces to the separatist regions does not explicitly confine them to the areas currently controlled by the Donbas governments.

.. 2) Russia's military buildup near Ukraine

Russia's military buildup around Ukraine has only increased in recent days and, despite statements by Russian and Belarusian officials, shows few signs of winding down. Russian troops continue to move into areas nearest to the Ukrainian border, with Russian national guard troops spotted in Belarus for the first time on Feb. 22. Similar to Russia's presence in the Donbas, this is meant to keep the threat of an invasion alive.

In another potential precursor of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine, Russia's foreign ministry announced on Feb. 22 it will evacuate its embassy staff from Ukraine as soon as possible, citing "repeated attacks" by Ukrainians since 2014. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensk also recently called up military reservists, signaling the Ukrainian government is beginning to become aware of the distinct possibility of an imminent Russian military action. A significant signpost for a Russian incursion would be a notification from the U.S. or Ukrainian defense officials that Russian units have reorganized into concentrated strike groups, which would come only hours before military action.



.. 3) Western-Russian diplomatic contacts

On Feb. 21, the same day it recognized the two rebel republics in Donbas, Russia insisted on holding meetings with European and U.S. officials. In the coming days, the European Union is likely to defend the need to continue diplomatic talks, even if the bloc has imposed sanctions on Russia. Brussels believes diplomacy can prevent an escalation of the conflict, even if it leads to a frozen conflict and not to a permanent solution.

An outcome similar to that of Russia's conflict with Georgia in 2008 – where political negotiations brought the armed battle to an end without fully solving the territorial disputes that caused it – is something that Moscow can probably accept because a frozen conflict would effectively end any chances of Ukraine ever joining NATO or the European Union. Such an outcome would also enable the European Union to reduce the probability of war in Ukraine, even if some of the sanctions against Russia stay in place for potentially years. The United States, which has taken a more hawkish stance on Russia's demands for security guarantees, is probably the main obstacle to this scenario. There is for now little sign that the West, and the United States in particular, is prepared for an immediate return to dialogue as Russia continues to push unacceptable

demands while continuing to engage in escalation. A meeting between the two countries' foreign affairs chiefs scheduled for Feb. 24 was canceled, with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken saying that "now that we see the invasion is beginning and Russia has made clear its wholesale rejection of diplomacy, it does not make sense to go forward with that meeting at this time." This suggests another summit between Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden is unlikely at this time. U.S. and European leaders, however, will keep the option for de-escalation talks open.

.. 4) The West's response

So far, the West's reaction to events in eastern Ukraine [2] has been relatively mild. On Feb. 22, the European Union announced that it will limit the Russian government's access to the bloc's capital and financial services markets. In addition, the bloc agreed to sanction all the legislators in the Russian State Duma who supported the recognition of the rebel republics, as well as 27 individuals and entities accused of destabilizing Ukraine. Following weeks of internal and external pressure, the German government also announced the suspension of the certification process of the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Germany and Russia (Berlin, however, could reverse this decision in the future).

Separately, the United Kingdom froze the assets of five Russian banks and several Russian individuals involved in the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics in eastern Ukraine. Both the European Union and the United Kingdom also banned trade with the two separatist regions. Finally, the United States announced sanctions against two Russian financial institutions and on Russia's sovereign debt, in addition to personal sanctions targeting representatives of the Russian elite and their families.

These announcements show that the United States and its allies in Europe are not displaying their full firepower, as tougher sanctions have been avoided in an understanding they will be needed in response to Russia's further plans for escalation [3]. In an effort to keep negotiation channels open with Moscow, Western leaders will likely only consider resorting to more drastic measures (such as banning exports of strategic technology to Russia, targeting larger Russian banks, or even cutting Russia off from the SWIFT messaging system for electronic payments) in the case of a substantial escalation of the conflict, which could come in a matter of days.

Referenced Content:

[1] [russia-recognizes-luhansk-and-donetsk-ukrainian-separatist-republics](#)

[2] [bidens-comments-ukraine-wont-change-russia-s-calculus](#)

[3] [west-s-dilemma-sanctioning-russian-aggression-ukraine](#)