**Why Putin is Winning but will not Invade Ukraine?**

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Make no mistake: Russia’s President Vladimir Putin is winning the fight in Ukraine-so far. Threatening to invade is far wiser than invading. Putin knows that. Barring a catastrophic mishap, Putin has no intention of invading or attacking Ukraine. The costs would be too great in Russian casualties and crippling sanctions that would trigger a huge backlash at home.

Three additional reasons make this case why he is winning and why he will not attack. Putin has the initiative. Thus, he maintains the upper hand and can ratchet up or down the sense of threat.

Russia has the advantage of geography and interior lines of communications. Despite the cold weather and the relatively primitive conditions of the roadways, Putin can readily maneuver his military to conform with his aims.

Last, the US and the West are uncertain about Putin’s intentions and are relying on intelligence that may have been manipulated by Russia and suspect in concluding that Russia may mount a military attack with 175,000 troops in early 2022 when cold weather freezes otherwise soft terrain allowing armor operations.

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A thorough analysis of this intelligence is essential now, with the forecast of a Russian invasion in the New Year. In the past, US intelligence too often got it wrong. That may not be the case today. As Ronald Reagan advised: “trust but verify.”

The record of US intelligence is far from perfect. From concluding that a second attack against US destroyers by the North Vietnamese in August 1964 triggered America’s entry into that war; that Russia and China would move closer to the west with their political systems; that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction; to believing the Kabul government would survive for months after NATO’s withdrawal, its current assessments about Ukraine ought not to be accepted at face value.

Given Putin’s KGB background, Russia may be using deception and misinformation about its intentions to create the perception of the immediacy of an attack as political leverage. After all, Russia has the capability now to invade Ukraine and need not wait. The ground already is sufficiently hardened to facilitate armor operations. And how close Russian forces are from the Ukraine border is not clear. Its major bases at Voronezh and Yelnya are hundreds of miles away from Ukraine. Nor is whether Russia is using empty buildings and tents to suggest a larger force is present has been tested.

Of course, the US could be purposely exaggerating the Russian military threat as a preemptive means to discourage an attack and put Russia on the defensive. This information is highly classified. That does not mean this intelligence should not be challenged-what was not done in 2002 before the Iraq disaster over non-existent weapons of mass destruction and two decades later in contending the Afghan government could hold out for six months.

The Western response in threatening unprecedented consequences seems to have led Putin to accede to negotiations. This weekend, the G-7 issued a stern warning that Putin must take seriously. Possibly fearing that calling for an Article 4 consultation under the NATO Treaty-The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened -might divide rather than unite the alliance, President Biden has consulted separately with a number of members on the path ahead.

The White House has repeatedly stressed the firmness of Biden’s conversation with Putin. After all, Biden must play to a domestic audience that, after the precipitous Afghan withdrawal, question his judgment in handling a crisis. And likewise, while allies need strong leadership from the US, some remain hesitant given the Trump administration’s retrenchment and concern about the 2024 election.

Diplomacy is the only sensible policy. Understanding that Putin has no intention of invading is also important. Putin craves respect and treatment as a peer. He wants a buffer with the West. Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova are his immediate targets. And he needs some actions by the West that will enable him at some stage to remove his forces.

Extended diplomacy can achieve a resolution if the West shows unity and is not too hurried to end this so-called crisis on Putin’s terms. The foundation for success, however, remains clever and persistent American leadership. Teddy Roosevelt’s advice works: Speak softly and carry a big stick. Sanctions to include denying Russia access to the SWIFT banking system and stopping the Nordstream II pipeline are mighty big sticks if we know how to use them.

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