

Russia Invades Ukraine a Second Time—Why It Matters to the U.S.

THE SITUATION

After months of military buildup around Ukraine, Russia has used military force to change the borders of a European country for the second time in eight years. During the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, Russia launched a missile attack against every major city in Ukraine but Lviv. This was followed by a three-pronged ground invasion: (1) from the Ukraine–Belarus border with the main objective being Kyiv; (2) from the Ukraine–Russia border with the immediate objective being Ukraine’s second-largest city Kharkiv; and (3) from the south along the boundary that divides Ukraine from Russian-occupied Crimea.

Vladimir Putin’s decision to launch a further invasion of Ukraine is a tragedy on many levels. It is a human tragedy, a tragedy for the country of Ukraine, and a tragedy for international law. Putin’s final objectives are not yet clear, but what is certain is that he seeks to change internationally recognized boundaries and impose the autocracy of Russian rule over a significant portion of Ukraine.

BACKGROUND

At every turn since coming to power in 1999, Russian President Putin has sought to undermine U.S. interests. By invading U.S. partners Georgia and Ukraine, using banned chemical weapons to assassinate Russian regime dissidents in the United Kingdom, employing sophisticated cyberattacks against Americans, or election meddling and spreading disinformation, Putin has demonstrated that he cannot

be trusted. An easy Russian takeover of Ukraine will embolden Putin to be even more aggressive in the future. The loss of human life and the economic impact of a major war in Eastern Europe are impossible to calculate.

Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014. Since then, Russia has illegally occupied Crimea, which includes approximately 7 percent of Ukraine’s landmass and more than half of its coastline. Russia provoked and supported a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not previously exist. With its second invasion, Russia has now drastically escalated a war that has already resulted in more than 14,000 lives lost and 30,000 wounded, heavily damaging the Ukrainian economy and hampering Ukraine’s progress toward deepening ties with the West. Hundreds more Ukrainian troops and civilians have already been killed or wounded just in the first days of renewed fighting.

U.S. SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

Since Ukraine is not a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the U.S. does not have an obligation to deploy combat troops to defend the country. Thanks to military and financial support and training from the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Poland, and the three Baltic states, the Ukrainian armed forces have never been better trained, equipped, experienced, and motivated.

NATO continues to have an interest in helping Ukraine to defend itself. Russia’s continuing and escalating aggression undermines

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transatlantic stability. Prudent measures exist that the U.S. can take to support Ukraine short of deploying American combat troops to the country.

- **Every country has the right to self-defense.** The U.S. must coordinate with allies, especially those that share a land border with Ukraine, to resupply weapons, munitions, and other material—and do so immediately and without restrictions. The U.S. should also share intelligence with the Ukrainian government.
- **The Russian Federation must face disproportionate, crippling, top-to-bottom economic sanctions from the U.S.** These sanctions should not only include the Kremlin’s political elites and oligarchs but the entire Russian banking and financial sectors and whole industrial sectors. Russia should be isolated from the world community.

U.S. SUPPORT FOR NATO MEMBERS

The U.S. has a treaty obligation under NATO to help to defend the territory of Alliance members. The U.S. should make crystal clear that any attack against a NATO member will have severe military consequences.

- **The U.S. should bolster the defense of NATO’s eastern flank (the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania).** The U.S. should take

prudent and responsible measures to ensure that the required force posture is present in Europe to deter, and if necessary, defeat, Russian aggression against a NATO member.

- **In the longer term, the U.S. must consider additional means to reinforce deterrence:** stationing additional U.S. forces forward, increasing defense spending to ensure that the U.S. military is up to the challenges of facing both Russia and China, and persuading NATO partners to spend more on defense and increase the size of their militaries.

RUSSIA IS THE AGGRESSOR

Russia is the aggressor, and Ukraine is the victim. For Americans who believe in strong and secure national borders, the primacy of national sovereignty, and the right to self-defense, support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression is natural. A sovereign Ukraine is also necessary for overall European stability, which is in U.S. and NATO interests.

Modern Ukraine represents the idea that every country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path, to decide with whom it has relations, and how, and by whom, it is governed. No outside actor (in this case, Russia) should have a veto on any country’s membership or closer relations with organizations, such as NATO. In many ways, the viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in Ukraine.