The Ukraine Crisis - Part 2: NATO, Russian Invasion and the Prospect of World War 3

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

UKRAINE VIDEO SERIES | PART 2

acTVism Munich (acTV): Thank you for joining us for Part 2 of this video series. In Part 1, you provided context to the Ukraine crisis and also examined the role of the U.S. since the Biden administration took office. In this part, we want to focus on whether a Russian invasion is likely. What is your assessment of this possibility?

Peter Kuznik (PK): And so why is it possible that Russia would consider invading? This is a time when that actually could happen, because the US after 2014, after the Russian intervention in the seizure of Crimea, imposed very heavy sanctions on Russia and the sanctions have had a bite on the Russian economy, the Russian people, hurt standard of living there, but Russia has rebounded from that. Russia economically is in a strong position now, a relatively strong position. The economy is stable. It's growing at a slow rate, although Russia has been hurt badly by the pandemic. Only about 35 percent of the Russian people from what I see have taken the vaccine. There's a lot of mistrust of the government there. Although we have to mention that Putin's approval ratings are around 60 percent from the Levada Institute, which is independent, we trust their reports. So he is, Putin is popular. You got a situation of, Putin's approval ratings are about 60 percent or a little above. Biden's approval ratings are in the low 40s. Zelensky's approval ratings are below 25 percent, so he's the one who's in the weakest position inside Ukraine. Ukraine has not dealt with the corruption problem. Corruption is rampant in Ukraine. He's not dealt with the oligarchs. You know, the situation in Ukraine is very chaotic and very disturbing. And then we'd look at Biden, the situation for Biden, unfortunately in a lot of ways is very weak in the United States, too. And he's not, his messaging has been terrible. He's not gotten credit for the positive things he's been doing in terms of infrastructure and his Build Back Better Plan. The Republican strategy is to undermine him every step of the way. And it's looking like the Republicans are in a good
position in 2022 to regain control of at least one, the House or the Senate, if not both. And they're in a good position in 2024 to possibly defeat the Democrats. Who knows, we could get that more on the fascists, more on Trump back in there. So it's a bad situation. But Biden's calculation is that he looked very weak and disorganised and incompetent with the withdrawal from Afghanistan. It was chaotic. It was bungled. The optics were terrible on the withdrawal. So he's in a weak position and it looks like he's got to be the macho man. He's got to show how tough he is. He's got to not make concessions. He's got to stand up to the Russians. So Biden is in a weakened position. Putin, on the other hand, is in some ways a better position because on the one hand, he's got, his popular approval ratings are relatively high. Most leaders would kill to have 60 percent approval ratings. The economy is stable. Russia's main export, as we know, is energy. Europe is in desperate need because of the short supply of oil and gas. Europe is in desperate need for Russian energy supplies. The prices are skyrocketing again, which puts Russia in a stronger position. And the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has come online. Now, the final implementation has been somewhat delayed. They're saying the Germans, after five years of this, are saying, Well, we discovered that this company is actually based in Switzerland, so we've got to finish up this paperwork before the energy can start flowing. So that's been somewhat on hold. But the US has announced that it's not going to put the sanctions on the companies that are involved in this. So it's going to go through. So I'm sorry, that's kind of along with that answer, but it's a complicated situation. So what Biden has been trying to do is get the Europeans on the US side. Get the Europeans to go against their own economic interests and to support the threat of greatly increased sanctions on Russia if Russia moves against Ukraine. So they're talking about, they're saying, we're going to do things that we did not do back in 2014 if you invade Ukraine. We're going to, you know, send more lethal aid. They're not saying exactly what they're threatening- to knock Russia off the Swift international transaction system, to prevent Russia from getting funding in the West to do the energy projects, and other things Russia envisions for its development in this decade... They're also, I think, threatening to bolster NATO in Ukraine and in Eastern Europe, things that Putin does not want to see. However, look at Putin's position. The sanctions have not been lifted. Russia learnt that it can live with sanctions. The US focus, he knows the US does not want to get involved in another war. He knows that he's in a military strong position. That they could, despite the fact that the Ukrainian army has been strengthened and improved in recent years, if Russia invades they are going to defeat the Ukrainian army. There's not any doubt about that. And nobody really is talking about NATO or the US sending troops into Russia. Poland has been pressuring NATO to try to preempt an invasion by putting troops there, but NATO has no commitment to Ukraine. Ukraine is not a part of NATO, and so the assumption is that NATO is not going to get militarily involved directly in Ukraine, but they are going to do other things. And so, so Putin will succeed. He also knows that the Western focus is on China. The Pentagon has said that China is the pacing threat. Biden's focus is on relations with China and the competition or confrontation and new Cold War with China. And so the West's attention is not on Ukraine. The US does not want to get involved in Ukraine. Europe has reason to not want to support all these tough US sanctions. So in that sense, this is a propitious time for Putin to move.
acTV: Could you explain the context of the international actors and alliances involved? Do you believe that the crisis in Ukraine has the potential to escalate into a Third World War?

PK: But Putin has also been strengthening his alliances, so he's strengthened his ties to China, Tehran to some extent. But where did Putin go on Monday, the day before the summit with Biden? - this meeting conference call with Biden. He left Russia only for the second time since the pandemic began, and he flew to New Delhi for a meeting with Narendra Modi. Now, India is in an interesting position because it did join the QUAD with the United States, with Japan and Australia and India. So who do we have there? Japan, Australia, the US and India in the QUAD. And India did have that confrontation, a fight with the Board of Forces in the Himalayas with China and 20 Indian troops were killed in that fight. So there's been this tension growing between India and China. And so the US has been with its Indo-Pacific strategy, trying to get India on the United States side. However, India also has had long standing close relations with Russia. So Putin goes there, and it's a love fest between Putin and Modi during his visit to India. And so Putin is also strengthening his alliances. And if you look at it, one way you've got the US and Europe, the old hegemonic forces aligned and you've got Russia, India, China, Tehran, one could say the forces of the future. Certainly India and China, with 1.4 billion people, 1.3 billion people are projected to not only be the biggest countries in the world, but also the strongest economies in the coming decades. And so we've got a mess of a situation and a dangerous situation. So they fortunately hold their conference call on Tuesday, and we don't really know exactly what, but we have some indications. What Jake Sullivan is saying is that if Russia de-escalates, if Russia eases the threat posed back from this confrontational stance in Ukraine, then all issues are on the table. A resolution of the Ukrainian conflict, which means to me the Minsk Protocols. Clearly France and Germany have not succeeded in putting pressure on Kiev. But if the US also starts putting pressure on Kiev, maybe we're going to be able to get back to negotiating a diplomatic solution which everybody wants, easing of the military build-up in Ukraine, putting in Minsk Protocols, cease fire, resolve that crisis. That would be what Putin would love to see in Ukraine. He also wants some guarantee that Ukraine will not join NATO if the Minsk Protocols go into effect. I think that gives them veto power over Ukraine joining NATO. He doesn't want to see Ukraine being a beachhead. And that would probably not happen also. And also, he wants to discuss the greater security situation in Europe. So he'd like to see a de-escalation of these tensions. Sullivan has given a signal that if they can resolve this conflict diplomatically, that all these things can be on the table. So maybe we're on the verge of a positive resolution, or maybe we're on the verge of World War three. Because the only, you know, when I play this scenario out, the Ukrainians are not going to be able to resist the Russian invasion very long. They're going to be elements inside NATO that are going to want a stronger response. Some that don't want a stronger response, but some that want a stronger response. I can just see a lot of scenarios in which this escalates militarily. And that's the disastrous scenario, because the US capability is essentially nuclear. Once there's any threat of nuclear, then everything potentially unravels in a very, very disastrous way. I should also mention that in terms of Biden's political position in the US, he's
under a lot of pressure. He is under pressure from the Hawks within his own party. People like Menendez, Senator Menendez, who's the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And he's also under pressure from the Republicans, tremendous pressure. As soon as the meeting ended the Chair of the Republican National Committee, Ronna McDaniel, says the following. She says, Biden's weak leadership on the international stage has emboldened our enemies and shaken our allies' trust. While claiming to be tough on Russia, Biden gifted Putin the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline while simultaneously embarking on a job-killing crusade against the US energy industry. Today's meeting underscores how Biden's weak global leadership, the Afghanistan disaster and failure at our border is emblematic of his "America last" agenda. You know, so the pressure on him is great to not look like he's making concessions, that he's the tough guy, the macho man. And so we're in a precarious situation. I see a lot of scenarios. There are also rogue elements inside Ukraine. Some of these fascist militias who I could see launching an attack trying to provoke something. It's crazy. It's suicidal. But these people are not always very, very rational. And so they want missiles there. They've gotten these very potent missiles from Turkey. They want more US missiles there. So many scenarios in which this could go out of control. I think Biden realises that and is trying to ease some of those tensions. Putin is not a crazy person. Putin is a rational actor and wants to be able to get what he sees as being in Russia's security interests without a military confrontation. So there is some slight grounds for optimism, but it's a very precarious situation.

END