



The Ukraine Crisis Explained: United States versus Russia

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acTVism (acTV): Thank you very much for being with us today, Peter! In our last interview with you, we explored the historical context of the Ukraine crisis. We will provide the link to that interview in the description of this video.

In this part, we would like to focus on current events. Could you give us an update on the recent escalation in Ukraine and provide some context?

Peter Kuznick (PK): There was no specific event that precipitated the current crisis. So in that sense, it's different than 2008, when NATO extended the possibility of membership to Ukraine and Georgia very specifically in those agreements and public statements and George W. Bush was pushing for Ukraine and Georgia to be added to NATO. That precipitated very directly the Russian move against Georgia really. This and then in 2014, there was a specific provocation obviously, with a coup that overthrew and ousted Yanukovych and the takeover of anti-Russian forces in Ukraine in 2014. This is different. This has been a long simmering issue to the Russians. And if you look at the whole history of NATO expansion, even somebody like Yeltsin who was so friendly to the United States. Recently there is the release of new documents showing how upset even Yeltsin was back in 1994 about NATO's expansion, even before it had actually begun during that time. And we know Gorbachev was. And we know Putin has been for 20 years. But Putin was never in a position of sufficient strength to do something about it. But that changed more recently, and a number of things have gone into the equation that have changed the situation. Number one, when the United States pulled out of the ABM Treaty in 2002, Russia began its nuclear modernisation. Other countries are modernising now, but Russia was ahead of the rest of the world in modernising. And so this begins back in the early 2000s and then culminates, you could say, with Putin's March 1st, 2018, state of the nation address, when he announced his five new nuclear weapons, wonder weapons, all of which can circumvent US missile defence- number one. Number two, Russia had been modernising its conventional forces back in 2008. Even in 2014 Russia's capabilities were actually quite limited, but for the last eight years, Putin has been doing everything he can to modernise Russia's military capabilities. Interestingly, there

was an article in yesterday's New York Times talking about Russia's military capabilities and prowess and the success of its modernisation across the board, in terms of communications, in terms of modernising the weapons, in terms of deployments. Russia is ahead of the game now in that regard. So this is very different than it was even a few years ago. So from a military standpoint, Russia can stand up to the US and NATO anywhere in Europe, and certainly in Ukraine or in the areas surrounding Russia. They made sure of that. So that's one area. And I want to get back to that in a different context. Secondly, Russia's economy has strengthened. Russia has become much less dependent on foreign banks, on foreign investments, even in foreign trade in a lot of ways, the sanctions that were imposed after 2014 have, if anything, done a couple effects. One is that Russia has now become more economically self-sufficient and independent and less dependent. Secondly, it strengthened Russia's ties with China. Also with India and Iran and others, but especially with China. So that's put Russia in a different geopolitical and a different economic situation. Bolstered by the fact that energy prices have skyrocketed. The price of natural gas has gone up 400 percent in Europe in one year alone. So Russia has got a lot of currency and few debts compared to other countries in terms of debt as a proportion of GDP. Russia is in a very, very strong position. So that puts it another way in a good position to act. Number three, Russia is in a strong position in terms of Europe- an energy dependency. Not only have the energy prices skyrocketed, but 41 percent of Europe's natural gas comes from Russia and 25 percent of Europe's oil comes from Russia. So Russia has the Europeans by the short hairs right now, and it's in a position to, actually, it has been able to divide Europe that way. So let's say that's number four, that Europe is much more divided and Trump contributed to that. Clearly, Trump's America First Make America Great Again stupidity policy, attacking America's allies with trade wars, with verbal assaults, with undependability in every regard without consulting them, has created a situation where Biden, when he came to power- but he kept saying, Is America's back again? We're not going to provide the leadership. We're going to unify Europe. Nobody trusts the United States at this point in any real says, because they know that as quickly as Biden might try to do something to unify, then Trump could get back in there in 2024 or some other clown who's going to take the exact opposite position. So not only is this a factor in dealing with Iran or dealing with Russia or dealing with China, it is a factor in dealing with Europe as well. So there are divisions. And so that's why Macron keeps saying Europe needs an independent foreign policy separate from the United States. It's also why, despite everything that Blinken and Biden have been saying about unity between the US and Europe, no space between us, there's a lot of space between us. Which is why Germany especially, Baerbock, has been pretty hawkish, the Green Party foreign minister. But Scholz has been much less so. Much less willing to commit, to even cutting off Nord Stream 2. So Nord Stream 2 is finished, a lot of European financing, and was ready to come online, except for some more paperwork, and it's going to drop costs, create more energy, direct flow from Russia, bypass Ukraine, which the Ukrainians are very unhappy about and America is unhappy about. But the Europeans, and Germany has not been willing to commit to cutting off Nord Stream 2 if Russia moves militarily. So that also puts Russia in a better position. And Germany, throughout Germany's history, is very, very anti-war, and so they don't even

want to see the kind of aid that the US and especially Britain- when Britain sent lethal aid recently to Ukraine or to Estonia, they had to bypass German airspace. Germany has been refusing to give that kind of aid. So Germany, that's why this Ukrainian politician says, What is Germany going to give us next? Pillows? You know, so Germany has been in that- so we don't have that kind of unity right now. So that also puts Russia in a good position. On top of that, we've got the fact that Russia has not only bolstered and modernised its forces, but has been deploying them differently. So we saw what happened with Russia's intervention into Syria. It was much more successful, much more effective. Their air campaign, much more effective than anybody had anticipated. That's a very important development. And on top of that, we've had other signs of Russia's military confidence right now. So Russia is in a strong position and this is the right time for it to act, partly because of distractions. France has an election coming up in April. Other countries have elections coming up. The US has the midterms. On top of that there's a perception that Russia and China have, that the US is a declining superpower. That meeting in Anchorage between the two top Chinese foreign policy makers and Blinken and Sullivan in March of this year was very, very revealing and significant. Because Blinken gets up with a two minute description of all the things that we don't like about China and then the Chinese spokesperson gets up for 16 and a half minutes and harangues the US and says, You are no longer in a position morally, militarily, economically to talk to us from a position of strength. And he goes through the list of all the American transgressions in recent years and says, You talk about a rules based international order. What kind of bullshit is that, he says, you know, what about the United Nations, about international law that you've been breaking time and time again? And so we've got a situation now where Russia and China especially are getting closer together. Both see the US in a position of decline, which was reinforced by the way the US pulled out of Afghanistan. That made everybody think, Wow, they really don't have their game together at all. And that Biden, who comes in there claiming to be so competent, is actually quite incompetent. So you've got all of those factors at play that make this the right moment. Plus the fact that the ground is freezing, that the tanks can get into Ukraine without any problem, that they've got 130 or so troops on the border, including the ones in Belarus for those war military exercises, that they've gone from 59 battalions to 162 battalions recently. And at the same time, NATO and the US have been more provocative. They've been sending lethal aid. The US did not, under Obama, agree to send lethal aid to Ukraine. It was Trump who started to do that in 2018. Then there was hope in 2019 when Zelensky came to power. And initially he was a comedian in Russia and he was speaking in Russian. And people were optimistic that maybe he would return to the Minsk II agreements and that we would have been able to find a diplomatic off ramp. But late 2019, he became much more anti-Russian. And then he made clear that he doesn't want to return to the Minsk II agreements and wouldn't negotiate on that. He also got more and more NATO military aid, more and more NATO trainers, including at least a dozen NATO countries, sending trainers there, including the US. He also got the Bayraktar drones from Turkey, which proved so effective in Azerbaijan defeating Armenia. So all of these things coming together, it looks increasingly to Russia that Ukraine is much more in the anti Russia Pro- NATO camp. And that's a non-starter. Putin made that clear years

ago, 14 years ago, and a lot of Americans got that, including current US CIA director Burns, who was then in 2008 the US ambassador to Russia. And when they started talking about Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO, Burns writes back a memo to Washington titled: Nyet means nyet, don't cross Russia's red lines. This is insanity. And so you've got Burns and you've got Sherman, who is a little bit more of a states person and you know, and there's some space there between them, between the Hawks. The Victoria Nulands, the Blinkens and the Sullivans and the Campbells, as some of the other people there. So if Russia is going to act, this is about the best, most propitious time for them to do so from a lot of ways. That's why this is happening now. That's a long winded answer to your question, I think.

acTV: How do you think the situation will develop? What is the worst-case scenario? And what can be done to de-escalate the situation?

PK: Nobody seems to have any idea, and I don't have any idea, either. If there's going to be a war. Everything, I mean, the indications after Russia received the written response to their demands and questions from NATO and Washington, Russia's response was fairly muted. And that's a good thing. You've got Lavrov and Peskov both saying that they're disappointed that this is no progress, that they're not optimistic, but they want to keep talking. Putin is saying the same thing. They want to keep talking. So that's a good sign because they did not get what they wanted in terms of their demands. They did not get any guarantee Ukraine won't join NATO. They don't get any guarantee that NATO won't expand to the East. They're not going to guarantee that NATO will not put munitions in the surrounding areas that can attack Russia. They didn't get any guarantee that NATO is going to pull back to 1997 borders. So it didn't get their fundamental demands. But they did agree to keep talking, and they did say there was progress of some of the secondary issues. Issues like the missiles question, armed forces or the transparency, or the arms control negotiations. Those are important, but they're secondary to Russia. I look for historical analogies. And there's a lot of bad analogies going around. And one of the bad analogies is the Munich analogy. And the Munich analogy is the West believe that what happened with Munich with Chamberlain in 38' was that because everybody wasn't standing up to Hitler, then they appeased Hitler and Hitler just kept on going. And they say that Putin is the same way. Well, it's a bad analogy. And there are a lot of people making it. You've got American leaders making the Munich analogy. Michael McCaul, who is the ranking Republican member on the Foreign Affairs Committee, said, quote, that we all view this after Afghanistan as a moment of weakness. So we're not projecting strength. As Reagan talked about a projected weakness which historically goes back to Hitler and Chamberlain always invites aggression. I think you're going to see a lot more of it. You also have people like Marco Mikkelsen, the chairman of the Estonian Foreign Affairs Committee, who says, quote, it smells like Munich 1938. This whole idea. Well, that's a bad analogy. And the more that the US does to build up Ukraine, to show how strong and tough we are, the more likely we are to provoking a Russian military action- number one. Number two, Monroe Doctrine. Interesting op-ed last week in The New York Times by Peter Beinart, who talks about, says, and Beinart quotes Blinken. Blinken says, Oh, well, the

United States doesn't believe I can give you that. Quote two, Blinken says one country does not have the right to dictate the policies of another or tell that country with whom it may associate. One country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history. Well, maybe it should be, but it hasn't been. And Beinart argues there that the US has had his sphere of influence in Central South America since 1823 with the Monroe Doctrine. And he goes on there and he quotes Pompeo, and he quotes Tillerson and he quotes Bolton. And they all say, just a couple of years ago, of course, we've got a sphere of influence, and that applies to all of South America. And the US has overthrown government after government after government in that area. It's not just the Cuban missile crisis. So the sphere of influence argument is nonsense also. But the Cuban Missile Crisis is the more interesting one. In some ways, it was an existential crisis. In some ways there were weapons put on America's border, and you saw how America responded. But the other thing about it that people lose sight of is that in 1962, during that crisis, Russia was in a terribly compromised, weakened position. The US was ahead between ten to one and twenty to one, in the number of nuclear weapons in the number of bombers that could strike the other side in the number of intercontinental ballistic missiles. That vantage has been erased. However, there is an important lesson to be learnt, and that is that that negotiation, that crisis ended not with public diplomacy, like is going on here in the meetings of Geneva and Vienna and Brussels. That's not going to solve this. Because the United States can't back down and say that is not an open door for NATO, and we're going to withdraw that. That crisis ended when Robert Kennedy on October 27th, as the US was about to invade the next day, met with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, and they came to a private understanding. And that this didn't come out for years and years and years what they agreed on. But the United States gave Russia private assurances from the top that the US would withdraw its nuclear missiles from Turkey within five months and would not invade Cuba in exchange for Russia withdrawing its missiles. That was the deal. We have to have the same kind of backroom negotiations today. We're not going to have a public negotiation. We can't do it. The US cannot back down from NATO at this point the way Russia wants. The question is, will Russia accept American assurances knowing that within three years, it could be another president, within one year there could be another party controlling the House in the Senate. And not trusting America's goodwill. So but that's the question, if they can. What we need is an agreement, Russian troops are going to maybe stay on the border for a little bit to save face and then they're going to withdraw, but they're not going to invade. The US is going to promise not to expand NATO any further and to begin cutting back on those more recent deployments of 5000 more NATO troops to the Baltic countries and to Poland and Romania. And go beyond that. And we're going to have a summit. We're going to call for a summit. And I'd like to see a global summit with Russia, China, the US, Germany and India. That's who I would choose right now. The way we're going to diffuse this tension is by having a positive commitment to work together as allies and not as adversaries and not as enemies. And we're going to deal together with nuclear weapons. We're going to deal together. So we're moving toward drought and dramatic reductions in nuclear weapons, below the threshold for nuclear winter and no first use across the board. We're going to deal with the

climate change, which is dramatically affecting Russia, that permafrost in Russia is melting. It's going to have enormous, terrible consequences long before that's going to create useful agriculture several decades from now. So we're going to deal with that. We're going to deal with the global health issue and the pandemic, which affects everybody. And we're going to deal with global development and the gap between rich and poor. And we're going to help Russia make that transition that they need to make from being a country dependent on oil and gas to a modern, thriving economy. So can it be done? Yes. Is there another road out?! The other road that is a little bit promising is there was a meeting a couple of days ago in Paris between the members of the Normandy Group who had originally negotiated the Minsk II agreement. That's Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine. And they had an eight hour meeting, and they said it was positive, they didn't come to any agreement, but they hadn't met since December of 2019, so they didn't expect to come to an agreement. But the basis for that is that they'll have a ceasefire, they will withdraw the forces, Russian forces will withdraw, they'll accept the border, they close the border between Ukraine and Russia, and they'll give autonomy to the Donbass area. And I don't understand the intricacies of this. But experts I've been reading say if that happens then the Donbass will have veto power over Ukraine joining NATO, that will solve that immediate problem for the Russians. Russia has already given something like 600000 passports to people in the Donbass. Those people identify with Russia much more than with Ukraine and or Kiev. And so that's another way out of this crisis. So I see a lot of off ramps, but there's also a lot of very dangerous signs, increasing Russian troops on the border, increasing war games, increasing naval operations in the Black Sea, increasing aggression from NATO and from the US, in sending more and more arms into Ukraine and drawing more and more of a hard line. So there's no guarantee, but there are ways out of this. And if we have some statesmanship, it can be done.

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