



Escalation of the Crisis in Ukraine in the Spring of 2021

YAMAZOE Hiroshi

America, Europe, and Russia Division, Regional Studies Department

NIDSコメンタリー

NIDS Commentary No. 165, May 13, 2021

Introduction

Military tensions between Ukraine and Russia mounted from March to April 2021. It was widely reported that there was a growing concentration of Russian troops and increasing danger of military conflict in areas such as Voronezh Oblast, a part of Russian territory situated near the Eastern part of Ukraine (Donbas region) where military conflict has been ongoing since 2014. President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine appealed to the leaders of various countries of the dangers posed by the Russian military, and held a telephone conference with Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan on April 14.¹ Will a military conflict really arise between Russia and Ukraine, and will it escalate to a dangerous level beyond that? In the following, we will see the involvement of the Putin administration in the Ukrainian crisis to date as well as the factors behind that decision, and discuss the points that should be noted about the situation in 2021.

The Ukrainian crisis since 2014, and Russia's involvement

Russia's operation to annex the Crimean Peninsula between February and March 2014 marked a significant turning point in its relationship with Ukraine and many other countries. It is believed that the Putin administration, while understanding it would receive the hostility and disadvantageous treatment as a consequence of its actions, made the decision to execute this operation in order to avoid unacceptable losses. This was the fear that the whole of Ukraine would break off ties with Russia as a result of the political upheaval that occurred in Kiev in February 2014, join the "enemy camp" of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and become a frontline for attacks on Russia. The proposed Association Agreement between the European Union (EU) and Ukraine, which had triggered the political upheaval, included a provision that ruled out the possibility of Ukraine's involvement in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAU) framework promoted by Russia. If the Putin administration were to do nothing about this problem, there were also fears that its legitimacy as the leader of the great power

¹ ["Escalation and Russian troops on border: Zelensky hold talks with Japan's Prime Minister,"](#) UKRINFORM, April 14, 2021.

Russia would be questioned. Based on the results of psychological research, it has also been pointed out that avoiding loss, rather than gaining profit, provides greater incentive for people to take actions that are accompanied by high risks.²

In February 2014, the Russian military announced that the start of a snap inspection near the Ukrainian border.³ This is a form of military exercise that verifies that troops have acted swiftly in response to a mobilization order that is issued suddenly without prior warning. Attention was given to large-scale movements by the Russian military, which was capable of undertaking military operations. Depending on how the situation in Ukraine develops, in the event that the Ukrainian military launches an operation that causes damage to the troops of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, for example, the scenario of an invasion by the Russian military was also highly probable (Russia demonstrated this against Georgia in August 2008). In reality, unofficial special troops had supported a regime change by the pro-Russian politicians on the Crimean Peninsula, and the new local government held a “referendum” on the Crimean Peninsula on March 16. As a result of this “referendum,” the Crimean Peninsula became a member of the Russian Federation.⁴

In April 2014, anti-Kiev forces launched an armed battle in Donetsk Oblast and Luhansk Oblast (Donbas region) in the eastern part of Ukraine. Russia is believed to have sent direct military support from July to August, when the Ukrainian military gradually suppressed the conflict. The armed forces regained stable power, and President Putin proposed a peace deal in September. A similar pattern occurred between January and February 2015; this time, the leaders of Russia, Germany, and France took the lead in drawing up the “Minsk II” agreement, which remain as the conditions for the realization of peace even today.

Russia has already suffered losses such as economic sanctions. If it were to inject military power, in addition to the deterioration of the international environment, it also has to be prepared to incur great losses in the regular Russian army on an extremely dangerous battlefield. However, if the Ukrainian military succeeded in suppressing the armed forces in the Donbas region, Russia would lose its foothold to intervene by force in Ukrainian territory. Hence, it is likely that Russia had sent the minimum level of military support needed to prevent such losses as it sought to signal that it would

² Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, *Anzen Hosho no Kokusai Seijigaku: Aseri to Ogori (International Politics of Security: Impatience and Pride)*, second edition, Yuhikaku Publishing, 2014, pp.139-166.

³ Michael Kofman, Katya Migacheva, Brian Nichiporuk, Andrew Radin, Olesya Tkacheva, Jenny Oberholtzer, [Lessons from Russia’s Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine](#), RAND Corporation, 2017.

⁴ Refer to the author’s papers and their respective citations for details on the use of diverse methods by Russia and the ideas behind that. Hiroshi Yamazoe, “[Russia’s Multi-layered Means of Conflict](#)” (Briefing Memo), National Institute for Defense Studies, October 2020. Hiroshi Yamazoe, “Nuclear Weapons for Russia’s International Struggle: Ultimate Means, Conflict Localization Means, and Narrative Offensive Means in the ‘Strategic Deterrence’ Concept,” *Kokusai Seiji*, No. 203, March 2021.

prevent any number of attempts by the Ukrainian military to change the status quo.

In 2015, the Assad regime had been driven into a corner by rebel forces in the Syrian civil war, and faced a dangerous situation. Partly motivated by its refusal to allow a civic movement to gain momentum and overthrow the government, the Putin administration attempted to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime by responding to its request, launching air operations from September to ensure the continued survival of the regime. This can also be described as another example of the decision to exercise military force in order to prevent heavy losses.

On the other hand, tensions between Ukraine and Russia mounted after Ukrainian naval vessels were captured by Russia in November 2018. However, this incident did not escalate to the level of a military conflict. Furthermore, military conflicts have not spread beyond the Donbas region to other regions such as Odesa and Kiev, and to date, there have been no incidents in Kiev where the people were incited to overthrow the government.

Based on the above, the Putin administration's decision to undertake a military operation is likely to be triggered mainly by the perception of an imminent crisis of significant loss of its interests or profits. At the same time, it also has the intention of limiting the scope of operation so as to prevent unnecessary escalation to a serious military conflict. Moreover, the preparation of military forces that are not used in reality also sends out the signal that there could be a scenario of even more dangerous military conflicts, and is used to limit the scope for the exercising of force.

From political tensions to military tensions in 2021

Are there any reasons for the Putin administration in 2021 to shift to the implementation of hardline measures, driven by a fear of suffering heavy losses? While it seems unlikely that Russia will be exposed to military threat, March 2021 saw an increase in the political confrontations that Russia would consider to be problematic.

President Zelensky of Ukraine defeated the incumbent President, Petro Poroshenko, in the April 2019 presidential elections by committing to resolve the Donbas problem, including engaging in dialogue with Russia. In reality, however, little progress was made in his attempts to resolve the issue with Russia. Recently, he has begun to demonstrate a marked hardline stance, and has announced that he will recapture the Donbas region and Crimean Peninsula.

In a significant move taken from last year to this year, President Zelensky has created an international cooperative framework called the “Crimea Platform,” with the aim of putting international pressure on Russia.⁵ On March 16, 2021, which marks seven years since the implementation of the “referendum” on the Crimean Peninsula, President

⁵ [“Crimea Platform: Ukraine’s Initiative to Raise the Costs of Russia’s Occupation,” Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), February 15, 2021.

Zelensky called for international cooperation on the Crimea Platform. In response, the G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement stated support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine and gave positive affirmation to this Platform,⁶ while a number of countries including Turkey and Lithuania conveyed their support for the Platform.⁷ With plans to convene a summit for the official launch of the Crimea Platform on August 23, Ukraine's Independence Day, President Zelensky has been calling on President Biden of the United States and Prime Minister Suga of Japan, among other leaders, to join the Platform. If his efforts gain momentum and become a powerful force in reality, it is likely to threaten Russia's current position and motivate Russia to take action to limit the extent of unfavorable developments.

In a new move, the Ukrainian authorities also imposed sanctions on February 20, which included freezing the financial activities of Viktor Medvedchuk, a member of the Ukrainian parliament. Medvedchuk is the leader of the "Opposition Platform – For Life," a political party that advocates peace. He is also a personal friend of President Putin, and has been perceived in the Ukrainian political circles to be working for Russia's interests. The clamping down on Medvedchuk can be seen as a new and serious threat to Russia's assets for political work in Ukraine.

According to Dr. Dumitru Minzarari from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Russia perceives such moves by Ukraine as political aggression or attempts to change the status quo, and may initiate military measures. He also states that we should not assume that Russia could not possibly exercise military force, and asserts that the military conflict could develop in the same way as the escalation of the Donbas conflict, even if it did not take the form of an open military invasion.⁸

Thereafter, from the end of March, reports on the movements of the Russian Army began to emerge. On March 30, General Ruslan Khomchak, chief of staff of the Ukraine Armed Forces, announced that 28 Battalion Tactical Groups (BTG) of the Russian military had gathered near the Ukrainian border and in the occupied areas. The American newspaper, the *New York Times*, also reported that the number of soldiers was estimated to be about 4,000, and that the United States European Command had raised its alert level.⁹ Movements by Russian troops were witnessed thereafter, and it was described as the largest scale of troop mobilization since 2014. German Chancellor Angela Merkel held a telephone conversation with President Putin on April 8, followed

⁶ "[Ukraine: G7 foreign ministers' statement, 18 March 2021](#)," United Kingdom Government, March 18, 2021.

⁷ "[Over 10 countries already back Crimean Platform – Zelensky's spokeswoman](#)," UNIAN, April 5, 2021.

⁸ Dumitru Minzarari, "[The Russian Military Escalation around Ukraine's Donbas: Risks and Scenarios for a Revised EU Policy](#)," German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), April 2021.

⁹ Mason Clark, "[Russia In Review: Russian Deployments Near Ukraine Likely Intended To Pressure Zelensky, Not Biden](#)," Institute for the Study of War (ISW), April 1, 2021; "[Zelensky: Military threat on Ukraine's borders persistent](#)," UNIAN, April 26, 2021.

by one between President Joseph Biden of the United States and President Putin on April 13, in which both leaders called for President Putin to withdraw the troops. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, pointed out that more than 100,000 Russian troops had gathered, and called on Russia to ease tensions.¹⁰

Michael Kofman, Senior Research Scientist with CNA, an American thinktank on naval issues, pointed out that the moves by the Russian military are different from usual military exercises, and signal its preparations for military actions in reality. He also explained that the purpose of these actions is to forcibly restrict Ukraine's political actions, rather than to conduct an invasive operation.¹¹ Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, speculates that the Kremlin had established credibility for the possible occurrence of war in order to avoid the possibility of a war occurring in reality.¹² Speaking to the Congress on April 15, Tod Wolters, Commander of the United States European Command, stated that there was "low to medium risk" of Russia invading Ukraine over the next few weeks, and that the likelihood of such an invasion would wane based on current trends.¹³

Conclusion

In the course of the preparations for this paper, an important trend of the cooling-off of the situation was observed. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly on April 21, President Putin adopted a style of emphasizing domestic affairs such as the countermeasures against the spread of the COVID-19 disease. Apart from a warning to Western countries not to cross the line, he did not deliver any messages that could heighten military tensions. On April 22, Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu announced that snap inspections would be ended and troops would be withdrawn from the Crimean Peninsula by May 1.¹⁴ These troops include the 58th Army of the Southern Military District, 41st Army of the Central Military District, and the 7th, 76th, and 98th Airborne Troops. As this was the first official announcement on some of the troops deployed by Russia, there is a need to pay close attention to future moves.¹⁵

¹⁰ ["Russian Military Build-Up Near Ukraine Numbers More Than 100,000 Troops, EU Says,"](#) Reuters, April 19, 2021.

¹¹ Michael Kofman, "Russia's Military Buildup Near Ukraine Is an Intimidation Tactic," *Moscow Times*, April 3, 2021.

¹² Dmitri Trenin, ["Russia-Ukraine War Alert: What's Behind It and What Lies Ahead?"](#) Carnegie Moscow Center, April 13, 2021.

¹³ ["Top general: 'Low to medium risk' of Russia invading Ukraine in next few weeks,"](#) *The Hill*, April 15, 2021.

¹⁴ [«Министр обороны РФ принял решение завершить внезапную проверку боеготовности войск Южного, Западного военных округов и ВДВ»](#) Ministry of Defense of Russian Federation, April 22, 2021.

¹⁵ Senior Research Scientist Michael Kofman pointed to the possibility that troops could still be in a state of mobilization, and that it should not be concluded that the Russian troops had been withdrawn as a consequence of the deterrence effect by Western countries. Michael Kofman,

These developments signify that Russia is easing military tensions for the time being. However, this does not necessarily mean that the situation has been resolved. Even at the beginning of May, the United States and Ukraine stated that Russian military forces remained near the Ukrainian border.¹⁶ To begin with, the conflict in the Donbas region of East Ukraine is still ongoing with increasing danger; from March to April, the ceasefire agreement was violated and the number of casualties has risen. There are probably people who are motivated to change the status quo through the escalation of the situation, and Kiev and Moscow may not necessarily be able to control them (for example, in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, which was considered to be a frozen conflict, large-scale battles took place in 2016 and 2020, leading to changes in the status quo). Furthermore, as President Zelensky plans to convene a summit meeting for the Crimea Platform in August to demonstrate his efforts to recapture the Crimean Peninsula, political tensions are likely to rise around this period.

As Russia has demonstrated its ability and will to escalate political tensions to military tensions quickly, such as in this case, it is also possible for Ukraine to take this into consideration and keep the political tensions within a certain range (which could be Russia's goal this time). However, in the next crisis, if there should be any miscalculations by one party, such as underestimating the resolve of the other party, it could give rise to military tensions and cause an escalation that cannot be controlled. If that were to happen, international relations would be greatly destabilized. Hence, there is also a need for Japan, despite our position in East Asia, to pay close attention, without underestimating the Ukrainian crisis as a past conflict in a remote place.

プロフィール

profile

YAMAZOE Hiroshi

Senior Research Fellow

America, Europe, and Russia Division,

Regional Studies Department

Areas of expertise:

Russian security and international history

本欄における見解は、防衛研究所を代表するものではありません。

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防衛研究所企画部企画調整課

直 通 : 03-3260-3011

代 表 : 03-3268-3111 (内線 29171)

FAX : 03-3260-3034

* 防衛研究所ウェブサイト : <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/>

[@KofmanMichael](#), Twitter, April 22, 2021.

¹⁶ On May 6, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with President Zelensky and the Ukrainian leadership in Kiev. [“Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at a Joint Press Availability,”](#) U.S. Department of State, May 6, 2021.