

Name: _____

The Ukraine Crisis—Background

Instructions: Read the information below on the crisis in Ukraine and then fill in the boxes on “Graphic Organizer—Charting the Crisis.” Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

What are the origins of the current crisis in Ukraine?

The origins of the current crisis in Ukraine stretch back to the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Soviet Union’s disintegration disrupted relations between Russia and other former Soviet republics. Under the Soviet system, the republics had been linked economically not only to Moscow, but also to each other. Ukraine was formerly a republic of the Soviet Union, but became an independent country in 1991.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union affected Russia’s defense system. Russia lost key military installations located in other former Soviet states. These facilities had been deliberately built on the periphery of the Soviet Union to protect the heartland of the country from attack. Another concern for the Russian government was the large number of ethnic Russians living in these neighboring lands. At the same time, Russian control was not what most of its newly independent neighbors wanted. National pride and a desire to end the heavy Russian influence of the Soviet era contributed to this desire of former Soviet states to escape Russian dominance.

Today, in addition to feelings of national pride, Russia’s neighbors want relations with the strong

economies and political systems of the United States, Europe, and East Asia. Some people in these countries also see membership in the NATO military alliance and the European Union as a means to achieve security and prosperity. Discussion about the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO in 2008 was seen in Russia as a serious security threat.

No other issue has increased tension between Russia and the United States more than the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO was created by the United States and its Western European allies in 1949 to block Soviet aggression in Europe. The Russian government claims that NATO expansion and Ukraine’s desire to join is a serious and unacceptable threat to its security.

In November 2021, Russia began a buildup of its military forces along the borders of Ukraine that has continued into 2022. In February 2022, the United States government warned that a Russian invasion of Ukraine could happen within days.

Russia’s decision to use military force to annex the Crimean peninsula and claim it from Ukraine as part of Russia in 2014 contributed to the U.S. belief that Russia will use force to invade and reclaim Ukraine.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

The United States created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. Under the provisions of NATO, the United States, Canada, and ten countries of Western Europe pledged to defend one another if any member were attacked. NATO was formed in response to U.S. and European concerns about the Soviet Union. It was the United States’ first peacetime military alliance. A key part of the NATO alliance was that the United States maintained a large, permanent military presence in Europe in order to project power and defend alliance members during the Cold War. Despite the Cold War ending and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO still exists. Twenty-nine countries are members of the military alliance today.

What are some international perspectives on the situation?

Ukraine

The Ukrainian government is deeply concerned about the buildup of Russian military forces on the border of Ukraine. It believes its security is threatened by the Russian military, as it has been since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Ukrainian President Zelensky points out that the Ukrainian government has been fighting Russian-backed forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine since then. Zelensky has urged the United States and its European allies not to wait to act until Russia invades and to impose economic sanctions now. (Economic sanctions are restrictions on interna-

tional trade and financial transactions.)

“We urge all efforts before, not after a possible escalation. Ukraine needs security guarantees today. European security is threatened by a war in the center of Europe. Ukraine needs real and efficient security guarantees. That’s in the interest of all our European partners.”

—Ukrainian President’s Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak, February 11, 2022

Although the goal of obtaining NATO membership was adopted as part of Ukraine’s constitution in 2017, President Zelensky suggested that Ukraine might be forced to rethink that goal.



Sasha Maksymenko [CC BY 2.0].

In the winter of 2013-14, protesters in Kiev’s Independence Square demonstrated against pro-Russia Ukrainian President Yanukovich’s decision to deepen Ukraine’s ties with Russia. Riot police and security forces used violence and intimidation tactics in their crackdown against continuing demonstrations. In January 2014, Yanukovich’s government implemented anti-democratic legislation restricting political dissent. In late February, violence led to rising death tolls among protesters and the police. Under growing pressure, Yanukovich fled Kiev to Russia and the Ukrainian parliament voted to oust him from government. In March 2014, the crisis escalated further. Russia used military forces to annex Crimea and claimed it from Ukraine as part of Russia. Residents of Crimea, 70 percent of whom are ethnic Russians, voted overwhelmingly to cement their ties with Russia. Russian-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian forces in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk since then.

Ukrainians are not united in their demands for the future of their country. Widespread divisions hinge upon the question: Should Ukraine follow a European path or establish closer ties with Russia? Tens of thousands of Ukrainians, many from the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, support closer ties to Russia.

Russia

The Russian government denies that it is going to invade Ukraine. During negotiations and from statements from President Vladimir Putin, Russia has insisted that NATO not expand to former Soviet countries and the United States not place offensive weapons near Russia. Putin also wants the United States to decrease its military forces in Eastern Europe. NATO membership for Ukraine is an issue of key concern.

“Imagine that Ukraine becomes a NATO member and launches those military operations [to retake Crimea]. Should we fight NATO then? Has anyone thought about it?”

—Russian President Vladimir Putin,
February 1, 2022

Putin sees U.S. and European policies since the end of the Cold War as hostile to Russia’s economic and political interests, but is willing to engage in diplomacy around the issue of Ukraine.

United States

The Biden administration has warned that Russia has already decided to invade Ukraine. The United States has said it will not send military forces if such an invasion takes place, but has supplied weapons and training to the Ukrainian military. It has threatened Russia with severe economic sanctions if it invades. The United States insists that Russia must respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity and its sovereignty (right to govern itself without outside interference). Although the United States publicly supports Ukraine’s right to join the NATO alliance, it has also said that it will not be allowed to join until all NATO members vote to approve

their membership. U.S. officials see Russia’s actions toward Ukraine as part of a larger strategy to divide and weaken the NATO alliance.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken plans to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to pursue diplomatic solutions to the conflict.

“We believe President Putin has made the decision, but until the tanks are actually rolling, and the planes are flying, we will use every opportunity and every minute we have to see if diplomacy can still dissuade President Putin from carrying this forward.”

—U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken,
February 20, 2022

The European Union

The European Union and its twenty-seven member states have expressed strong support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty in the face of Russia’s military build-up on its borders. There are different approaches among individual countries about the best course of action. France’s President Macron has engaged in direct diplomacy with Russian President Putin in an attempt to prevent war. Germany, which receives much of its natural gas from Russia, has agreed to its willingness to cancel a major gas pipeline project with Russia if it invades Ukraine. Germany and France have opposed NATO membership for Ukraine. U.S. and European diplomats are working hard to create a united European and U.S. response to the situation in Ukraine.

“Dialogue is a must but so is deterrence. Any further aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe costs for Russia.”

—Josep Borrell, High Representative of the
European Union for Foreign Affairs and
Security Policy, January 9, 2022