



# Ukraine Essential

**Brief Zero**

14 February 2022



## Introduction

Amid simmering tensions with respect to Ukraine, GLOBSEC is launching a weekly *Ukraine Essential* brief to highlight the most consequential elements of the rapidly evolving situation.

Recent developments include frenzied diplomatic efforts and a Russian [military buildup](#). Brief Zero, against this backdrop, aims to explain the high stakes and examine how the Minsk Agreements have come to be a major thorn hindering progress.

## High Stakes for Ukraine and everyone else

Two mutually interconnected tracks have unfolded over the past few months surrounding Ukraine. The first has witnessed Russian military posturing – a process that began in April 2021 and has become increasingly assertive from November 2021 onwards. Moscow’s initial moves are purportedly a reaction to several changes in Ukrainian policies regarding Donbas. Following a year-long effort seeking engagement with Russia over the Donbas peace accords, President Zelensky has returned to the Poroshenko era policy of applying pressure on Russia.

The second track pertains to Western interpretations of this Russian military posturing. Published intelligence assessments and political statements underlining the Russian threat, however, potentially overstate Moscow’s readiness to attack. The frequent public airing of intelligence, dubbed “[information war](#)”, serves to [deter](#) the Kremlin from military action. But it also places pressure on Ukraine to implement the Minsk Agreements, [official statements](#) from Kyiv indicate. The rhetorical deterrence strategy deployed by the West, spearheaded by the US and UK, is also buttressed through the provisions of an unprecedented amount of military aid, amounting to 1200 tons of equipment as of yet.

Kyiv and to a large degree the EU, however, differ from the US in their threat assessment. Kyiv has [openly sought to tone down](#) Washington’s rhetoric to avoid further destabilization. Ukrainian intelligence rather [has warned](#), since November, that the actual risk posed by [Russian plans](#) concern internal destabilization and the possibility that “right-wing radical forces can incite an active struggle”. Josep Borrell, the EU’s top diplomat, [outlined](#) three potential tactics that Moscow could employ to harm Ukraine – (1) cyber-warfare, (2) political destabilization, and (3) a land-grab of Donbas territories not currently controlled by Kyiv.

Washington’s approach could, partly, be a domestically informed political strategy intended to avoid a repeat of the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apart from this, the divergence in threat perceptions is undergirded by different troop level assessments. A [troop-to-task analysis](#) suggests that Russian deployment numbers at the border are still short of the necessary figures for a full scale occupation (a conclusion that Kyiv has maintained from the beginning). Russia, that said, [continues to increase troops](#) and expand these deployments to Belarus and the Black Sea, with nearly half of its 170 [BTGs](#) on the move. This escalation has seen the permanent troop level of 92-100K [swell](#) to 140K (and counting) at present. Parity has now been reached with Ukrainian troop totals in Donbas. And Ukraine is particularly vulnerable to attack from Belarus and the Azov Sea.

What does Moscow, however, want to achieve (especially considering that its demands have not been met by the West)? The Russian troop movements, notably, work as deterrence in two different ways: they enforce what Russia considers its sphere of influence and [make the world listen to its point of view](#). The US and NATO, moreover, have publicly announced that they will not take up the cause militarily for Ukraine. The increased weapons deliveries to Ukraine fail to alter this calculus given that they largely consist of ammunition (provided by the US) and weapons intended for urban warfare. From Moscow’s vantage point, the West, therefore, has come to respect its red lines. And following Western diplomatic efforts, the Normandy Format was revitalized, turning pressure, at least formally, to Kyiv to [implement the Minsk accords](#).

## Heeding Minsk Agreements

The Minsk Agreements have been disputed from the outset, with Kyiv justifiably feeling that they were signed while [staring down the barrel of a gun](#). While the accords were important for putting a stop to the grinding war, they established that the conflict was a local affair between Kyiv and the so-called separatists. Russia, alongside Germany and France, are listed as guarantors for implementation.

Kyiv, that said, has insisted from the outset that the conflict has been spurred by Russian aggression and informally calls it the [Russo-Ukrainian war](#). The agreements were indeed preceded by Russian military interventions that bolstered the separatist forces. This position “forgets” that the last days of the popular revolution called EuroMaidan morphed into a bloody conflict between protesters and law enforcement, culminating in the momentary [collapse of central authority](#). Russia exploited this internal crisis to annex Crimea and subsequently provided a boost to the [already brewing Donbas conflict](#).

The implementation of the [13 points](#) of the (2nd) Minsk Agreement has proven futile, with Kyiv unwilling to accept verification conducted by the separatists (insisting rather on Russian involvement). Ukraine further proposes that its decentralisation reform should apply to Donbas without any additional autonomy provided. Kyiv’s wary approach has been shaped by its desire to avoid an interpretation that the type of autonomy provided to Donbas would imply veto rights over major decisions in Kyiv. Donbas could, consequently, reorient Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation, which is currently strongly pro-Western.

Reacting to the pressure, Kyiv has sought to clarify that it is not willing or capable of implementing the agreements as this [“would bring chaos”](#). Numerous experts have, in fact, [suggested](#) that implementation of the Minsk agreements would lead to internal problems, with far right groups already mobilizing against their enforcement. But questions remain concerning how Russia will react if Kyiv abandons the Minsk Agreements.

## Back to Basics

Despite Washington’s growing assessment that a Russian attack on Ukraine is imminent, indefinite military and hybrid pressure on Ukraine and potential internal destabilization are the most likely scenarios.

If the US strategy of deterrence works, it could reduce the probability of a Russian invasion (but it would continue to be a probable outcome). This scenario would see Russian troops and movements remain to keep pressure on and around Ukraine. Tensions could continue to [grow in Donbas](#), where local escalation could trigger a Russian incursion.

The outcomes of the Normandy talks will also inevitably spark a Russian reaction. As HRVP Borrell suggested, formal recognition of the non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) by Russia may be the next step if Kyiv formally refuses to implement the Minsk agreements as interpreted by Moscow. The already deployed S-400 and other Russian weapon systems will likely stay in Belarus after the formal completion of the joint military exercises. Moscow could also advance military cooperation with Latin America to challenge the US in the Atlantic.

Permanent pressure may include a continued Russian military posture and other forms of hybrid and cyber interventions (especially exploiting Ukrainian political infighting). Despite geopolitical turmoil, Kyiv’s focus is first and foremost inward looking. The brewing energy crisis and the country’s financial situation has deprived the government of macro-economic stability, which had been one of the few achievements since Maidan. Meanwhile, the de-oligarchization process, which started in February 2021, has seen greater and greater haggling with oligarchs.

The risk of domestic political conflict is ever-present in Ukraine, with the original Maidan coalition [uniting against](#) President Zelensky, though the situation will not necessarily erupt. Pressure directed against the Minsk protocols has mobilized various patriotic segments of society that deem the agree-

ments an act of betrayal. Zelensky has sought to de-escalate the situation with Russia and resist the implementation of Minsk. Ukrainian society is also wary about further Russian reinforcements.

The most likely scenario will witness a turbulent year characterized by the considerable potential of internal and external disruptions. Ukraine needs all the support it can muster to [“muddle through”](#).

## Essential News Wrap

**Deterrence:** The US now assesses that a war is “imminent” with intelligence sources indicating February 16th as the potential start of hostilities by Russia. Numerous countries have started evacuating their personnel and advised nationals to leave Ukraine. The release of intelligence by Washington, dubbed [information warfare](#), could also serve to [deter Russia](#). Another batch of US security assistance, including Javelins, [arrived as part of almost 1200 tons](#) of military aid the US is providing to help Ukraine defend itself.

**Russian build-up:** According to Ukrainian [Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov](#), there is a ground contingent of 119,000 soldiers located at Ukraine’s borders (those with Russia, Belarus, and the NGCA). The addition of air and sea components brings the total to 140,000 troops altogether.

**French facilitation:** French President Emmanuel Macron visited Moscow in an [effort to de-escalate](#) the situation. French sources reported that talks included discussion over European security guarantees and promises that Russia will withdraw its forces from Belarus, remove its nuclear weapons and de-escalate its presence around Ukraine’s borders. Moscow, however, disputed this account. In Kyiv, Macron announced 1.2 billion EUR in macro-financial assistance and emphasized the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

**Ukraine, Poland, UK to form trilateral alliance:** The new alliance is an association of countries that share common principles, strive to strengthen security, and foster trade according to Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. The UK has gradually replaced the US role in the security sphere by, for example, taking over the building of the [Ochakiv naval base](#) as specified by the 2020 UK-Ukraine [Naval Agreement](#). Ukraine and Slovakia, meanwhile, have increased the gas import capacity - the guaranteed capacity for the physical import of natural gas from Europe will be increased by 42 million cubic meters per day (representing an additional 56 percent capacity or 15 mcm per day). Ukraine also started importing gas from neighbouring Hungary for the first time in history. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán requested an additional billion cubic meters of gas during his recent visit of Moscow. As Russian President [Putin revealed during a press conference](#), Hungary pays five times less than the spot price. If Budapest can re-sell this extra gas to Ukraine, it could offer a better deal for Ukraine than buying gas on the European spot market.

**Turkey, Ukraine sign free trade agreement:** The FTA, negotiated over 15 years, sets tariffs at zero on 95 percent of goods produced in Ukraine. Turkey, which has been exploring a bid to [purchase](#) Motor Sich, needs Ukraine’s engineering skills. Representatives of industrial sectors, however, have been [voicing](#) concerns over competition for the light industries particularly. According to [Europravda](#), this FTA is a concession from Kyiv for military and political support (including Turkish Bayraktar drones).

**Record remittances:** According to a National Bank of Ukraine [report](#), the volume of private money transfers to Ukraine in 2021 amounted to \$15.03 billion, a new record and as much as 25% more than the previous year (\$11.98 billion). The National Bank had expected transfers to come in at \$13.5 billion.