



# Drexel Hamilton

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## Outside the Wire

### Current Events: Military Aggression from Russia and China



A Ukrainian Army convoy near Klibodarivka in eastern Ukraine on Monday. Russia has built up a force of 100,000 at the border. Source: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

## Situation 1: The Buildup of Russian Military Forces on the Ukrainian Border

### **What is happening?**

Last month, Russia began moving military vehicles, equipment, and an estimated 110,000-150,000 soldiers to its border with Ukraine. While President Vladimir Putin has claimed this is strictly a training exercise, historical data suggests otherwise. In 2014, similar instances of military buildup on the border with Crimea took place and ultimately led to Russia's invasion of Crimea. Satellite imagery shows the extent of warships, tanks, jets, bombers, and other military forces postured in an offensive manner around Ukraine. Earlier this week, videos surfaced showing a Russian naval ship firing cruise missiles into the Black Sea in an apparent "exercise." On Thursday, Russia gave an order for some of their units to return to their permanent bases and claimed that this was an exercise to demonstrate defensive force.

### **How is the world responding?**

World leaders are responding to these events by calling on Russia to de-escalate its troop buildup. A combined statement from the G7 last week stated, "These large-scale troop movements, without prior notification, represent threatening and destabilizing activities." President Biden has denounced Vladimir Putin for the actions and is making attempts to open dialogue between the U.S. and Russia. Last week, President Biden formally requested a future summit meeting during a call with Putin, but it has been noted that a response has not been received yet.

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## **The U.S. Response:**

On April 15, the U.S. announced significant additional sanctions on Russia as a response to the escalation of force. These sanctions were meant to affect all individuals and entities that had involvement in the current military buildup on the Ukraine border, as well as the 2014 annexation of Crimea, foreign election interference, and the SolarWinds Cyberattack. The new restrictions prohibit U.S. institutions from dealing in Russian sovereign debt and add more than 40 names of individuals and entities to the restricted list published by the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC). Additionally, there have been added restrictions for U.S. institutions that deal with Russia's financial services, energy, defense, and oil sectors.



Admiral Essen fired multiple Kalibr (Caliber) cruise missiles in the Black Sea. Source: Zvezda

## **Situation 2: China's Escalation against Taiwan**

### **What is happening?**

China has been threatening Taiwan for years. However, their aggression has increased against Taiwan in the past month due to President Biden's initiatives to improve U.S.-Taiwan relations. There was already heightened aggression during 2020 when the Trump Administration sought deeper ties with the Taiwanese. Taiwan is a world leader in semiconductor production Taiwan provides a strategic advantage against the rise of China's economic power by remaining independent. In addition to authorizing more military equipment sales to Taiwan this year, President Biden has been requesting officials from Washington to visit their country more frequently in a show of U.S. support and willingness to come to Taiwan's defense. This is a commitment that stretches back to 1978 with the Taiwanese Relations Act. Beijing's response has been to increase their military presence around the island. In their biggest military drill this year, China sent 25 warplanes into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) last Monday. Earlier this month, we also witnessed naval drills of Chinese aircraft carriers posturing on the east and west sides of Taiwan. There are expectations for continued increases of these drills as Washington works to improve support for Taiwan.

### **The U.S. Response:**

The commander of U.S. military forces in the Indo-Pacific region, Admiral Philip Davidson, previously stated during a testimony in a Senate Armed Services Committee on Capitol Hill "Taiwan is clearly one of their [China's] ambitions... and I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years." From a strategic standpoint, the U.S. military recognizes China's moves as precursors to an invasion of Taiwan. While there hasn't been a new round of sanctions against China this month in response to the increased military drills, there were several rounds of sanctions this year already made in response to other issues. These

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included China's initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as human rights violations during the Hong Kong protests. Earlier this year, we saw a new round of sanctions in response to hostile military movements of Chinese naval ships in the South China Sea. Most of these sanctions were targeting individual government officials, although there have already been restrictions ([Executive Order 13959](#)) since November 2020 on U.S. investors from investing in 31 Chinese companies that the Department of Defense has identified as supporters of the Chinese military.



Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning sails through the Miyako Strait near Okinawa in this photo released by Japan's Defense Ministry on April 4, 2021. Source: Joint Staff Office of the Defense Ministry of Japan.

### **Conclusion:**

Our analysis is that both China and Russia are testing the U.S. under the new administration. President Biden's comments about Vladimir Putin as a "killer" have been followed by Russian aggression perhaps in an attempt to prompt U.S. negotiation via a show of force. Furthermore, the political imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny could also be motivating the troop buildup. That is, Vladimir Putin seeks to focus on "external threats" in an effort to deflect from the internal backlash. The same principle applies to China. As we saw in March, the meeting in Alaska did not go well and U.S.- Chinese relations remain fraught. Thus, military buildups, threats, and demonstrations of force are a way for countries to assert power and exact concessions. At the end of the day, the Chinese and Russians will want to see the true extent of U.S. willingness to deter any aggression. These aggressive acts are a means of intelligence gathering on their end.

Finally, after years of economic sanctions and diplomatic action, it is questionable whether these actions still have the same amount of deterrent capability.

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U.S. Department of the Treasury (2020, November 17). *Executive Order 13959*. President Donald Trump.

Retrieved from <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13959.pdf>

The White House (2021, April 15). *Executive Order on Blocking Property with Respect to Specified Harmful Foreign Activities of the Government of the Russian Federation*. President Joseph Biden.

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