

War of words

The US President is putting out a lot of information about Russian troops, weapons and naval deployments. He is telling us that an invasion of Ukraine may well be imminent. Russia denies an invasion but cannot credibly deny the deployment of a lot of military might. Mr Putin tells us these are Russian and Belarus forces jointly exercising on their own lands. The USA has a different view.

The USA speaking for NATO makes clear that NATO forces would not respond to invasion by entering the fight in Ukraine, but NATO would clearly be on the side of the Ukrainian government and the large majority of the people who would fight against a military takeover of their country. Some NATO members have supplied weapons to Ukraine and offered training to Ukrainian personnel. Presumably in the event of an invasion more such support would be supplied.

NATO's main threat to Russia is its members will impose wide ranging sanctions with a view to damaging the Russian economy. The idea is these would be tougher than the ones introduced after the annexation of Crimea . It is not clear they would extend to preventing Russia using western banking systems, nor has Germany made clear whether any of this extends to gas.

France and Germany hope for a negotiated settlement of the issues surrounding the Russian presence in Luhansk and Donetsk. They wish to revive the Minsk 2 Agreement they helped broker in 2015 which aimed to secure Russian withdrawal from east Ukraine in return for substantial devolved power to new elected governments in the two anti Kiev provinces. The original Agreement failed because the local forces and Russia wanted more devolution than Ukraine wished to provide, and Ukraine wanted a faster and more comprehensive Russian withdrawal than was on offer. Events in Crimea followed the expulsion of an elected Ukrainian President who wanted to follow a more pro Russian and less pro EU foreign policy.

The fate of East Ukraine is not however the only thing Russia is raising. Russia also wants assurances Ukraine will not pursue her wish to join NATO, and wants NATO to cut its forces deployed in its eastern member countries for self defence. The USA needs to handle the NATO discussions following consultation with allies, and France and Germany should continue the Minsk discussions following talks with the Ukraine government and the Eastern opponents of the Kiev line. President Biden has to erase again his suggestion that a limited Russian incursion would not be so bad, and stress the corrections his team have put out.