

Military movements and strained alliances in Eastern Europe drawn parallels with 1914

By Oisin Mcilroy

With Russia seemingly on the edge of invading Ukraine and border trouble being stirred up in Belarus, are there any parallels to be drawn between these tense precipice moments and those of the summer of 1914?



Satellite images taken on November 1, 2021 shows self propelled artillery systems and other military vehicles on the edge of the Russian town of Yelnya. Photo: Maxar Technologies

In the spring of this year, the Kremlin suddenly mobilised 100,000 troops, and thousands of tanks, aircraft, and warships close to the border with Ukraine. The sudden shock experienced across NATO soon began to ease as the force stopped short of the border and Russian officials explained away the move as an exercise to test troop preparedness. Though with Ukraine's defence ministry claiming earlier this month that 90,000 Russian soldiers remain stationed near their border, and in some cases over it in separatist-controlled areas, concern over invasion is far from gone.

"What we see is a significant, large Russian military build-up. We see an unusual concentration of troops. And we know that Russia has been willing to use these types of military capabilities before to conduct aggressive actions against Ukraine." commented NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg last week.

Indeed, this border build up is so distressing due to the fact that, according to the Pentagon, it involves a greater number of troops and equipment than was used by Russia to annex Crimea in 2014.

Russia's recent war games have also been a cause for concern, particularly September's seven-day Zapad-2021 exercise. Held every four years, it is usually not particularly concerning. This year, however, they invited Belarus, home to Europe's last dictator, Alexander Lukashenko. Russian President Vladimir Putin has made clear his intentions to deepen political, economic, and military ties with Belarus, providing several financial aid packages over recent years.

Russian ties to Belarus were a further cause for concern in the recent Poland-Belarus border crisis, not because of Putin's potential engineering of the incident, but rather that he wasn't consulted on Lukashenko's plan to funnel migrants towards Poland in order to sow discord within the EU, western intelligence outlets have reported. The possibility that Lukashenko created such a political crisis without the permission of his financier Putin marks him out as a rogue capable of creating volatile situations as well as one that will be difficult to defeat given his Russian protection.

This crisis was followed by further militaristic activity from both nations, including joint paratrooper drills near the Polish border and joint air force exercises. The Russian Ministry of Defence also announced that last week two long-range, supersonic Russian bombers practised "interaction with ground control points" involving troops from both nations. The following day they ran these drills for a second time over Belarus' airspace.

This activity has alarmed Ukraine to the extent that they now seem to be trying to warn off any potential encroachment from Belarus, sending 8,500 soldiers and 15 helicopters to its northern border to run military drills.

This is not the first time that Ukraine has responded to military pressure in recent months. In June, as a response to the Kremlin's spring mobilisation, Ukraine held naval exercises in the Black Sea with the U.S., ignoring Russian calls that they be cancelled, as well as large-scale invasion drills in July and September, also with American servicemen.

This pattern of militaristic build up and mobilisation is reminiscent of the events immediately leading up to the First World War, when nations across Europe began moving troops so frequently that eventually their only option was to use them or have their bluff called. This alone is of course no reason to draw comparison with 1914, but when such heightened militarism is combined with Russia's diplomatic schemes and its strained alliance with Belarus, the current state of affairs begins to reflect some of the primary factors historians commonly cite as having pushed Europe into the First World War.

On alliances, it was the strain and complications they frequently brought about which partially contributed to Europe going to war, prominent historians such as A.J.P. Taylor have argued. This same strain and complication can be seen in the relationship between Belarus and Russia - the former being the latter's largest economic trade partner and only neighbouring ally - but Lukashenko's unruliness has begun to strain the Kremlin's patience. Earlier this month Lukashenko threatened to close the Yamal-Europe pipeline carrying gas from Russia to the European Union if further sanctions were imposed upon his regime. Putin publicly stated, however, that his Belarussian counterpart had not consulted him before making this threat and warned him that such a move would harm relations between the two nations.

This alliance has also forced Ukraine to consider how they would fight a war on two fronts. If they come to believe that such a conflict is around the corner, they may think it strategically advantageous to make the first move in order to gain a fighting chance.

Tensions in Eastern Europe have been raised further by Russia's alleged-interventionist activity. This came to particular high point on Friday when Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, announced that the nation's intelligence service had foiled a coup attempt. He stopped short of directly accusing the Kremlin of playing a role in the plot, but implied that they were interfering with internal Ukrainian affairs. "We have challenges not only from the Russian Federation and possible escalation - we have big internal challenges. I received information that a coup d'état will take place in our country on December 1-2," Zelenskiy said.

All this is also not to say that a Third World War is around the corner, but rather that European leaders, allies and potential adversaries, have not entirely learned their lessons from the 'war to end all wars'. Times have changed, however, and such powerful nations no longer go to war as easily as they once did. Nuclear deterrents have brought with it the philosophy of "mutually assured destruction" and have made even the most hawkish of leaders fearful of annihilation. "I think that in [the Belarus-European Union border] crisis, the impulse to wrap it up will come via Russia," said Artyom Shraibman, a Belarusian scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center. "For Russia, escalation will get uncomfortable". As for the possibility of impending war with Ukraine, only time will tell.