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Critical Question #16

By: Kennedy Aikey, Caleb Clayton, and Drew Mantenieks

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Introduction

After a long-standing period of tension between the two nations, Russia began a military invasion of the eastern border of Ukraine on February 23, 2022. There has been an extensive history between Ukraine and Russia which has led to the start of this conflict. At this time, the invasion of Ukraine is a fluid situation with new developments occurring daily. Countries around the world are showing support for Ukraine and condemning Russia’s actions. These countries have placed strict sanctions on Russia, but have stopped short of sending military personnel to aid Ukraine. The United States has expressed our support of Ukraine and President Biden addressed the conflict during his State of the Union Address.

Question #1: What is happening with the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine?

In the early morning of February 24, 2022 more than 200,000 Russian troops began an invasion on Ukraine’s border. The first attacks targeted major military sites as well as Ukraine’s most heavily populated cities. The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has urged his citizens to take up arms and defend their country. In the following days, Russia continued to invade multiple cities by air, land, and sea. Russia has even advanced on to Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv. However, Ukraine has been able to hold off Russian troops and slow Russia’s invasion of Kyiv. After five days of conflict, Ukraine and Russia engaged in an early peace talk which came to no resolution. Vladimir Putin, the leader of Russia, has started to threaten other countries so they do not get involved and continues to send troops across Ukraine’s border. Reports suggest that thousands of people are being injured daily, with hundreds dying due to these attacks.

Several countries are coming to support Ukraine by placing a variety of sanctions on Russia. The United States and the United Kingdom have imposed the greatest financial sanctions on Russia and continue to place more sanctions on them as the conflict progresses. These sanctions have almost completely cut off Russia's biggest banks. Not only are financial sanctions being placed on Russia, but many other kinds as well. Russian airlines have been cut off by a large group of countries and Russian athletes are being banned from playing in international competitions. Many countries throughout the world are openly disapproving of Putin's actions and trying to persuade him to stop by using sanctions instead of engaging in the fighting. Unfortunately, it is unknown how much these sanctions will deter Putin from continuing the invasion.

Question #2: What precedent has inspired tension between these nations?

Ukraine and Russia have had a troubled history in opposition to one another. Dating back to 1922, Ukraine was among the founding nations of the Soviet Union. Its contiguous big brother, Russia, served as the ruling state of the collective that became the Soviet Union. Known formally as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the USSR adjoined a coalition of fifteen states under one sovereign rule.
During WWII, Ukraine became one of many nations occupied by Nazi Germany. While they were subjects under the authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union, they were also a Slavic people sought to be eradicated by the Nazis. As such, they revolted with an insurgency force, fighting alongside the Red Army against the Third Reich. According to ukrainetrek.com, “more than 5 million people in Ukraine died in the war, and about 2 million were moved to Germany for forced labor.”

Following the Allied victory in WWII, Ukraine remained a key state under the Soviet Union. In 1954, Nikita Kruschev transferred Crimea to Ukraine for economic purposes. As Soviet rule proved to subjugate Ukrainians, dissident movements spread across the nation throughout the period of the 1960s, furthering into the 1970s. The Ukrainian dissidents were among the thousands of neighboring Soviet dissidents imprisoned by the Kremlin during the Cold War.

April 26, 1986 proved to be an impactful day in the Soviet Union, as the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Pripyat, Ukraine experienced a meltdown. The meltdown left much of the surrounding area uninhabitable, as it was devastated by the effects of radioactive contamination. The Chernobyl meltdown proved to be a decisive blow against the Communist Party.

Perestroika began a period of political reform within the Soviet Union during the late 1980s. Under the direction of Mikhail Gorbachev, Glasnost called for policies of a more transparent Soviet government through judicial and economic changes.

1990 saw Ukraine’s first democratic election, furthering into a Declaration of Sovereignty for Ukraine. August of 1991 saw the Soviet Union toppled, allowing Ukraine to finally claim its independence as the sovereign state of Ukraine.

Ukraine’s attempts to join NATO has served as one of the most pressing matters in its relationship with Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a border between itself and the Western European nations making up NATO, Russia has impeded Ukraine’s ability to join NATO, despite their sovereignty.

1994 saw Ukraine join NATO’s “Partnership for Peace” arrangement, allowing it to be one of many post-Soviet states to join in cooperative efforts with the organization. 1997 saw Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma establish a pact with NATO, enacting a defense partnership.

The 2004 Orange Revolutions saw conflict arise between political parties supportive of Russia and those aligned with the West in Ukraine. 2008 furthered the conflict, as Russia prohibited Ukraine and Georgia from furthering their allegiances with NATO, bringing with it the Russian Invasion of Georgia, leading the EU to take measures in securing closer relations with Ukraine.

2014 saw Russia and pro-Russian Ukrainians seize control over Crimea, leading to a Russian supported Separatist War in the Donbas region. The war saw a temporary ceasefire following the first Minsk Agreement, but the parties failed to follow the terms set forth, leading to a continuation of fighting in the region. The second Minsk Agreement saw a more permanent end to the conflict, creating a security zone in which no heavy weaponry is permitted. Occasional conflicts broke out in the region following the agreement, but none substantial enough to prolong the war effort.
The election of President Volodymyr Zelensky brought forth some significant changes within Ukraine. He looked to end conflict in the east and deter corruption within the nation. He also has sought to improve relations with NATO and denounce pro-Russian oligarchs.

2021 saw Russia expend resources into a significant military buildup, heightening tensions between the two nations further. President Vladimir Putin has sought to delegitimize the sovereignty of Ukraine—questioning the legitimacy of its borders and suggesting that Russians and Ukrainians are one in the same. The completion of the Nord Stream 2 Pipeline further upset the Ukrainian people, seeing it as a means of Russia to undermine their economy.

Today, we are seeing the effects of this strained relationship take place now as Russia commenced an invasion of Ukraine. This conflict remains ongoing, and will demonstrate what is next to come in the troubled chronicles of this complicated relationship between Russia and Ukraine, as well as the adverse effects that it will have on the EU, NATO, and the rest of the world.

**Question #3: What may United States intervention mean for our nation, Ukraine, and the world at-large?**

President Joe Biden has indicated that he will not put American boots on the ground in Ukraine. On February 24th he said “Our forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict with Russia in Ukraine. Our forces are not going to Europe to fight in Ukraine but to defend our NATO Allies and reassure those Allies in the east.” He reinforced this during the State of the Union Address Tuesday. Thus far, the U.S. has sent 12,000 troops to Europe during the month of February to protect our NATO allies. The position of the United States is that it will do all that it can to avoid directly engaging with Russia because that would escalate the situation from a regional war to a world war.

If Putin were to invade a NATO ally, the United States would be bound to provide troops to fend off the Russian invasion. There is no telling what a global conflict of this scale would look like domestically or internationally. There is a great deal of uncertainty predicting what Putin might do in retaliation for other countries becoming involved. He has alluded to Russia's nuclear stockpile several times. Fiona Hill, a former official in the U.S. National Security Council specializing in Russian and European affairs, said that “The thing about Putin is, if he has an instrument, he wants to use it. Why have it if you can't?...So if anybody thinks that Putin wouldn’t use something that he’s got that is unusual and cruel, think again. Every time you think, “No, he wouldn’t, would he?” Well, yes, he would. And he wants us to know that, of course. It's not that we should be intimidated and scared. That’s exactly what he wants us to be. We have to prepare for those contingencies and figure out what is it that we’re going to do to head them off.”

**Parting Thoughts**

The unfolding events in Ukraine are unpredictable and will continue to develop over the next few weeks. It is clear that the history between Russia and Ukraine has been leading up to this invasion for a while now. President Biden addressed the United States during the State of the Union and affirmed that United States troops will not enter Ukraine, but they will support their NATO allies if Russia starts to invade them. People in Ukraine continue to fight for their country and their freedom, while other countries do what they can to support Ukraine.