

Global Hot Topics

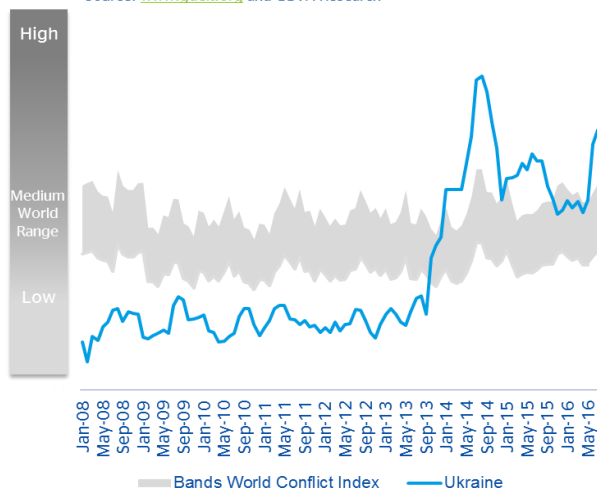
Ukraine: new Russian military escalation in Crimea

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Tensions heightened in Crimea between Russia and Ukraine to their most serious level since Russia annexed it from Ukraine in 2014 after an alleged attempt of Ukrainian security forces to enter Crimea took place last 7th August, which led to two killed Russian soldiers. In response, Russia rapidly escalated its military buildup on Ukraine's northern, eastern and southern borders and Ukrainian troops are being deployed to the de-facto Crimean border and are on high combat alert. The likelihood of a renewed open conflict in Crimea is increasing rapidly and would have important consequences, not only for Russia – Ukraine relation, but also for the Russian negotiations with the West and its relation with the NATO members.

Russia raises stakes over alleged Ukrainian attacks in Crimea...

BBVA Research Conflict Intensity Index in Ukraine 2008-16

(Number of conflicts / Total events)
Source: www.qdelt.org and BBVA Research

Tensions between Ukraine and Russia erupted during last days to their highest level in Crimea in the last two years, **increasing risks of a new crisis**. Russia accused Ukrainian security forces to attempt to enter Crimea on the night of 7th August with 20 explosive devices and mines. Russia's security service arrested Ukrainian security officials and new clashes flare up, where the alleged Ukrainian infiltrators killed a Russian soldier and a Federal Security Service officer, injuring also ten other Russians. In response to this incident, **Russia has escalated military activity in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine**, positioning its forces to stage a large-scale operation in the country.

The increased tension in Crimea comes at a time when **the conflict in eastern Ukraine seems to be heating up**. During last months, Russia has expanded its military presence on Ukraine's borders with multiple casualties over the frontline, possibly setting the stage for expanded operations. Hence, Russia may use this incident to justify a military escalation in Ukraine framing it as a defensive operation.

The incident led Russia to position military forces along all of its common borders with Ukraine (to the north in Bryansk district, to the east near Rostov, to the south in Crimea and to the west in separatist-controlled Moldovan territory), escalating hostilities and rapidly moving additional forces into the Black Sea to practice combating underwater "sabotage attacks". **Ukraine**, which denied the alleged incidents took place and dismissed the claims as Russian provocation, **also began to redeploy forces to the de-facto Crimean border to adjust to Russia's deployments** and to be on combat alert. Thus, the possibilities of a new crisis in Crimea are sharply increasing and preparations for conventional conflict between Russia and Ukraine are accelerating.

...with many possible reasons behind it

The conflict in Crimea breaks out after two years of almost no fighting in the territory, becoming **the most serious escalation on the peninsula since the annexation in 2014**. There could be several motivations behind this new escalation:

- Since the European Union voted to **extend sanctions against Russia until January 2017**, Russia could try to take advantage of an escalation of the fighting, thereby weakening Ukraine and **getting the West's attention** to persuade EU countries to drop the extended sanctions.
- Russia is trying to **set up a security corridor connecting separatist Donetsk and Luhansk areas with Crimea**. This corridor would solve to Crimea's current woes and its short and long-term infrastructure problems given its dependency of Ukraine, such as it is the case of electricity and water supply.
- Russia could try to **bolster domestic support before Russia's 18th September parliamentary elections**, when Crimea will participate for the first time since its annexation, and trying to distract from the Ukraine's 25th anniversary of independence from the Soviet Union next 24th August.

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