

Ukraine on the brink, China's Covid fear and No 10 holds its breath

The diplomatic avenues appear exhausted. The army units are in position. And perhaps most tellingly, nations including the US, Australia and Britain this week began moving embassy staff out of Kyiv. Is there any hope left of averting a Russian invasion of Ukraine, and how on earth did we get to this point?

Luke Harding reports from the frontline in south-eastern Ukraine, while Andrew Roth examines the build-up to the crisis. Then, on page 14, Simon Tisdall ruminates on the increasingly opaque motives of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, a "rogue male" on the world stage whose destructive actions must be reined in.

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China's controversial Winter Olympics are just a week away, but Beijing's biggest dilemma in the lead-up may come not from a diplomatic sporting cold shoulder, but an outbreak of Omicron. Will the fast-spreading Covid-19 variant force Beijing to double down on its national strategy of total virus suppression, or will it force a change - both in policy and mindset?

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Britain this week awaited the publication of a Cabinet Office report into lockdown parties at Downing Street, some more keenly than others. Boris Johnson's desperate efforts to change the national conversation were again derailed by new reports of a birthday gathering for the prime minister in June 2020. Will this prove the icing on the cake for those who want to see Johnson booted out of No 10? Watch this space ...

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On the cover

As Simon Tisdall writes this week, Ukraine may be a pawn in a still bigger game for Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. "His attitude, resembling a vendetta, is as emotional as it is rational. If he gets his way in Ukraine, his mission to create a Russian sphere of influence bordered by puppet states will accelerate."

Illustration: Guardian Design/Getty