

U.S., Russia to Hold Security, Ukraine Talks Early January in Geneva

By [Evan Gershkovich](#) for AFP and [Sebastian Smith](#) for AFP

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Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin at 2021 Geneva Summit. **White House**

The United States and Russia will hold much-anticipated talks in early January on European security and the Ukraine conflict after Moscow demanded NATO halt its eastward expansion.

A spokesperson for the U.S. National Security Council told AFP late Monday that the talks with Russia will take place on Jan. 10.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov on Tuesday confirmed the date and said that the talks will take place in Geneva, where U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian leader Vladimir Putin met for their first summit in June.

The Kremlin has grown increasingly insistent that the West and NATO are encroaching dangerously close to Russia's borders.

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Moscow earlier this month presented the West with sweeping security demands, saying NATO must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet republics.

"The United States looks forward to engaging with Russia," the National Security Council spokesperson said.

"When we sit down to talk, Russia can put its concerns on the table and we will put our concerns on the table with Russia's activities as well."

The Biden administration has insisted on taking action in lockstep with European allies.

A US official said Tuesday that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered the USS Harry Truman carrier strike group to stay in the Mediterranean and hold off on sailing on to the Middle East.

The purpose of the order was "to reassure our allies and partners of our commitment to collective defence," the official said.

Moscow and NATO representatives are also expected to meet on Jan. 12, while the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which includes Russia and the United States, will address the tensions the following day.

Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau of Poland, which takes the helm of the OSCE in the new year, will address the meeting, said a spokesperson for the organization founded during the Cold War as a forum involving Moscow and the West.

Not just 'blah blah blah'

The talks come after weeks of heightening tensions, with Washington accusing Russia of massing tens of thousands of troops around ex-Soviet Ukraine and plotting a winter invasion.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Moscow in the talks would take a "hard line" aimed at defending its interests and avoiding "concessions."

At the United Nations, Russia's deputy envoy, Dmitry Polyanskiy, said the talks should be "serious" but also that Russia's draft agreements were not an "ultimatum" to the United States.

"I don't think that our colleagues will get away with some blah blah blah thing," he told reporters.

"It's a constructive proposal, but it's the proposal that works for everybody and that is in the interest of everybody," he said.

Ukraine has been seeking to break from Moscow's sphere of influence and eventually join the NATO alliance.

Russia already occupies a swath of its neighbor in the Crimean peninsula and is accused of

fomenting a separatist pro-Moscow rebellion in the industrial east of the country.

Deployment by Russia of tens of thousands of troops to the border sparked fears in Kiev and among its Western allies of a wider war, possibly including further seizures of Ukrainian territory.

Putin denies planning to attack the neighboring country, saying the troop movements are to defend Russia against an encroaching Western military.

The United States and its European partners have threatened to impose harsh economic sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine, while also offering to hold negotiations.

The National Security Council spokesperson said Ukraine's interests would not be ignored in cutting any deal with Russia.

Negotiations will include "nothing about our allies and partners without our allies and partners, including Ukraine," the spokesperson said.

"President Biden's approach on Ukraine has been clear and consistent: unite the alliance behind two tracks — deterrence and diplomacy. We are unified as an alliance on the consequences Russia would face if it moves on Ukraine."

There was no immediate word on who would represent the two sides on Jan. 10.

The meeting is part of the Strategic Security Dialogue initiative launched by Biden and Putin, which initially has focused on resuscitating post-Cold War nuclear arms control treaties.

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