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What a Week of Talks Between Russia and the West Revealed

If Russia cannot achieve its strategic goals by diplomatic means, it will resort to other methods.

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Meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. **NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization / flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)**

The meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his U.S. counterpart Antony Blinken on January 21 follows on from the previous week's intensive talks: the first round of U.S.-Russian dialogue on European security issues in Geneva, followed by sessions of the Russia-NATO Council in Brussels and the OSCE Standing Committee in Vienna. The extremely tough talks that took place last week in Europe didn't end in a public scandal or definitive rupture, but nor did they inspire confidence that the ongoing European security crisis can be resolved any time soon.

The lack of a diplomatic solution will logically lead to a further escalation of the crisis, and increase the chances that the only way out of it will be through the use of what Russian officials call "military technical means." While Moscow and Washington continue to assess the situation and prepare to take new steps, it makes sense to explore the roots of the crisis, to analyze the routes and consequences of its escalation, and also to look at alternative ways of dealing with the security conundrum in Europe's east.

Roots

The roots of the crisis can be clearly traced. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States and its allies established a European order based on the dominant role of America and the central position of NATO as an instrument for military and political regulation, and for guaranteeing Western security and the order they had created.

Russia, which had failed to become part of the West on its own terms and refused to accept the inferior role offered to it, found itself on the outside of that order, and was forced to accept the new state of affairs. The United States was aware that Russia was unhappy with the situation, but preferred to ignore it, since it viewed the country as a waning power.

History has shown, however, that if a large, defeated power has not been incorporated into the post-war order, or if it has not been offered a place in it that it finds acceptable, then over time, it will begin to take action aimed at destroying that order or, at the very least, significantly altering it.

This depends, of course, on the frustrated power having enough material potential, and on its leadership having the political will and public support. In Russia, these conditions began to form in the first half of the 2010s, as demonstrated by Moscow's reaction to the crisis in Ukraine and the subsequent confrontation with the United States and breakdown in relations with the EU.

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Evolution of the Confrontation

In the eight years of the confrontation with the West, Russia's foreign policy has continued to evolve, from adapting to inconvenient new realities to attempts to at least prevent the country's geopolitical position from deteriorating any further, and at best to change the situation to Russia's advantage. Still, right up until the start of 2021, this policy was essentially built upon that of Mikhail Gorbachev in the sense that it sought to reach mutual understanding—and establish partner relations—with the United States and Europe. Until very recently, President Vladimir Putin spent a great deal of time during lengthy televised discussions with U.S. interviewers trying to convince the American public that Russian interests do not run counter to those of the United States, and that Moscow and Washington can and should join forces against global challenges such as universal security, terrorist threats, or the pandemic.

That attitude changed at the start of 2021. That spring, Russian troops began large-scale military exercises along the Ukrainian border. U.S. intelligence suspected the drills could be

cover for preparations to invade Ukraine. Unable to ignore Russia's actions, U.S. President Joe Biden invited Putin to meet with him in Geneva, even though Russia had not previously been among the White House's priorities.

This tactic of forcing Washington to engage in talks with Moscow was actually voiced by Putin back in 2018, in an address to both chambers of the Russian parliament. Presenting a range of new weapons systems, the Russian president said of the United States: "No one listened to us before. Well, listen to us now."

The sole practical results of the two presidents' meeting in Geneva were the start of Russian-U.S. consultations on strategic stability and cybersecurity. However, on Ukraine, the Minsk process aimed at ending the conflict reached a diplomatic impasse, even as NATO increased the scale and frequency of its military exercises in the Black Sea area. In fact, the situation on Russia's western and southwestern borders only worsened.

The situation forced the Kremlin to return to its tactic of using force to put pressure on the White House. In the late fall of 2021, U.S. intelligence reported a growing threat on the Russian-Ukrainian border. An even bigger military buildup by Russian forces than that seen during the spring forced Washington to go even further than direct talks, and to agree to negotiations with Moscow on issues of European security.

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Forced Negotiations

In this respect, Russia's tactic of forcing the United States to the table had worked. So, building on this initial success, Moscow presented the Americans and their allies with a draft treaty and agreement outlining Russia's demands of the West on the issue of European security.

Last week's talks did not lead to a breakthrough, and nor indeed could they. It's unlikely that even the Kremlin was expecting its demands to be accepted. The kind of conditions put forward by Russia are usually only implemented by the losing side, which the United States is not.

What's more important is that for the first time since the talks on German reunification, the United States has sat down at the negotiating table with Russia to discuss the problems of European security. Plus, for the first time since its recent withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), Washington has shown willingness to reach an agreement on not deploying short and medium-range missiles in Europe, as well as on restricting military activity in Eastern Europe.

Not so long ago, Moscow would have viewed this as a major diplomatic win. Now, however, the bar has been set much higher. Russia insisted that the talks focus on its "binding" demands: not to expand NATO into former Soviet nations; not to position offensive weapons systems in Europe that could reach Russian territory; and to withdraw military infrastructure established by NATO in Eastern Europe since the signing of the Founding Act on relations with Russia in 1997.

Security Guarantees

Strictly speaking, there can only be one guarantee of security in the nuclear age, and that's the threat of mutually assured destruction. That has its drawbacks, however: in the event of an armed conflict between nuclear powers, the losing side may resort to using nuclear weapons to avoid being defeated, paving the way for an escalation that could lead to an exchange of massive nuclear strikes and the death of civilization.

All other guarantees are conditional and cannot be relied upon. Arms control and reduction measures, non-proliferation efforts, confidence-building measures and transparency, moratoriums, reciprocal or multilateral restraint, and so on are all aimed at increasing mutual predictability and ensuring that military and political decisions are taken with cool heads. Still, no legally binding treaties or politically binding agreements can provide absolute guarantees that they will be implemented.

International relations are based on the principle and—for independent players—the reality of state sovereignty. Nations don't just enter freely into agreements with each other; they are free to end those agreements too. In the last twenty years alone, the United States has unilaterally withdrawn from U.S.-Russian agreements on missile defense systems and intermediate-range missiles; the multilateral Open Skies Treaty; and the Iran nuclear deal. Cast-iron guarantees simply don't exist.

There are no illusions about any of this in the Kremlin and the Foreign Ministry, still less in military headquarters. There is no real trust in non-aggression pacts or detargeting (or zero targeting) agreements. Given the current domestic political situation in the United States, it's virtually impossible to reach any agreements with the country that would be ratified by two-thirds of U.S. senators. Putin himself acknowledged this when he said publicly that he wanted to see "at least legally binding agreements."

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It's possible that this is Putin's attempt to make up for the oversight of Gorbachev, who failed to secure legally binding undertakings not to expand NATO after German reunification. In recent times, this has once again become a hotly discussed topic among Russian officials and media.

There is, however, a broader way of looking at it. Of the five most recent waves of NATO expansion, four of them happened on Putin's watch: the Baltics, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria in 2004; Croatia and Albania in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; and North Macedonia in 2020. For a long time, Moscow had no way of resisting this process: it had neither enough influence in the countries in question, nor the means of putting pressure on them. Now it appears to have acquired those means, and Putin — apparently feeling a degree of responsibility for what has happened during his lengthy rule — is starting to use those means to make amends. The question is, how realistic is it for the Americans and Europeans to implement Russia's demands?

The Limits of Possibility

Politics, as the saying goes, is the art of the possible. At the center of Russia's draft treaty are three unconditional demands by Moscow: an end to NATO expansion, no more NATO infrastructure — in particular, offensive weapons — to be rolled out in Europe, and the withdrawal of military infrastructure deployed to Eastern Europe after 1997.

Moscow's main demand — no further NATO expansion onto the territory of the former Soviet Union — is de facto being implemented, since the United States and its allies are not prepared to take responsibility for the military defense of their clients, Ukraine and Georgia, and that is unlikely to change. The problem is not so much the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbas as the prospect of a direct confrontation with Russia in places where Moscow both has genuine security interests and is ready to use force to protect them if necessary. The United States, meanwhile, has no such interests or readiness to use force, and that is also unlikely to change.

Since the United States is not prepared to go to war with Russia for Ukraine, neither Ukraine nor Georgia will be accepted into NATO as long as Russia is able to prevent it. The threat of Ukraine being in NATO is, therefore, in fact a phantom one for the foreseeable future. The question of whether we might see NATO in Ukraine — in the form of offensive weapons, military bases, military advisers, arms supplies, and so on — is trickier. Having what would amount to an unsinkable aircraft carrier controlled by the United States on Moscow's doorstep, on hostile territory, even if Ukraine is not officially part of NATO, would be far more serious than the Baltic countries' NATO membership. This isn't a full-fledged threat just yet, but it certainly could become one, and what happens then?

There's a chance that an agreement could be reached on the issue of not locating U.S. missile stations in Ukraine, as attested to by the willingness of U.S. negotiators to discuss this topic in Geneva. The establishment of missile bases is not a military priority for Washington, and their hypothetical appearance around, say, Ukraine's Kharkiv area could be countered by equipping Russian submarines coasting the U.S. mainland with Zirkon (Tsirkon) hypersonic missiles.

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It's also possible that an agreement could be reached on U.S. and other NATO members' military bases in Ukraine. Right now Western countries are keen to avoid sustaining any losses in any fighting between Russia and Ukraine, and are therefore currently planning to evacuate their advisers from the country.

It will be harder, if not impossible, to agree on ending military and military-technology cooperation between Ukraine and the United States/NATO. The most that can be hoped for here is restrictions on the nature of arms supplied to Kyiv by the West. For that to happen, the United States will insist on a de-escalation of Russia's military preparations on Ukraine's borders. Any de-escalation, however, will have to be accompanied by restrictions on NATO maneuvers close to Russia's borders in Europe.

Moscow's demand for the withdrawal of all military infrastructure deployed to NATO's Eastern European member states is as impossible as it is largely unnecessary in terms of

Russia's security. The several thousand U.S. soldiers located on the territory in question don't exactly pose a serious threat to Russia. NATO battalions in the Baltics are, if anything, simply there to placate the three host countries: their presence on former Soviet territory may leave a bad taste in Moscow, but is hardly cause for alarm.

There is other infrastructure, of course, which really does pose a threat: first and foremost, U.S. missile defense components in Romania and Poland; air bases that could house planes capable of carrying nuclear weapons; naval bases; and so on. The issue of missile defense system launchers that could be adapted for intermediate-range missiles could be resolved as part of a new INF agreement. Other issues come under the umbrella of regular arms control in Europe, which has been shelved since NATO countries refused to ratify the adapted Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe.

There is a suspicion that the third key demand — effectively, a return to 1997 — was put forward so that it could later be retracted, thereby demonstrating Moscow's readiness to compromise. More potential for reaching agreements could lie in the unbundling of Russia's raft of proposals and demands, and willingness to pursue parallel tracks — but only if there is confidence that agreements can be reached that would satisfy Russia's security interests.

What Next?

The chances of the United States implementing Russia's demands in the format and timeframe set out by Moscow are non-existent. Agreements are theoretically possible on two of the three key issues: non-expansion and non-deployment. But any such agreements will be of a political, not legally binding nature.

Various Russian commentators have discussed the possibility of retracting the provisions of NATO's 2008 Bucharest declaration that stated that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO." Yet this is unlikely to happen at the alliance's summit in Madrid this year: there may be no real substance to such symbolism, but renouncing it would probably be too much of a loss of face for the United States and NATO.

That is not the only option, however. NATO could, at the initiative of the United States, announce a long-term moratorium on new members, for example. Biden has already said that Ukrainian membership of NATO is unlikely to be approved in the next decade, while some U.S. experts are talking about twenty to twenty-five years. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was more specific in his choice of words: "never ever." For the vast majority of today's politicians and officials, however, "never" may well mean "not in my lifetime." A figure of sixty-nine or even forty-nine years would work just as well.

It's also possible to agree on not deploying intermediate-range missiles and other offensive weapons: not as part of a treaty, but as an intergovernmental agreement between Russia and the United States, which wouldn't have to be ratified in the latter. It could also be possible during negotiations on the issue to address the sides' concerns about, respectively, U.S. missile defense launchers and new Russian cruise missiles.

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Finally, it would be possible to select specific areas of concern with regard to infrastructure on NATO's eastern flank and to resolve them through confidence-building measures.

None of the measures outlined above comprise either security guarantees or legally binding documents, but, as previously noted, Russia has long had the former via its nuclear arsenal and armed forces, while the latter are effectively impossible and would in any case not be absolute. Still, they would at least provide Russia with written assurances.

Countermeasures

For now, no agreements are in sight on the issues that concern Russia. For President Putin, however, a negative result also counts as a result. The Kremlin needed to express itself with full clarity on its security concerns in Europe, and it has made itself abundantly clear.

It's important to understand that Moscow's demands of the United States and NATO are in fact the strategic goals of Russian policy in Europe. Their aim is not to restore the Soviet Union, as some suggest. Rather, the idea is to reframe security in Europe — particularly in Europe's east — as a contractual relationship between the two principal strategic actors in the region, Russia and the United States/NATO, thus turning the page on an era when it was the business of the United States alone. This is regarded as a vital national security interest. If Russia cannot achieve its goal by diplomatic means, it will need to resort to other tools and methods.

Russian officials have said that if the talks fail, Moscow will take military-technical and even military measures. Those measures have not been specified in advance — unlike the Western sanctions that have been threatened in the event that Russia invades Ukrainian territory — but they are being widely discussed. A range of measures is likely to be proposed to Putin by his advisers, from keeping up the pressure with the threat of force and deploying new weapons systems to sensitive regions to much closer cooperation with Russia's ally Belarus and Chinese partners.

It's important, however, that these measures be a response to existing and likely future security threats to Russia, rather than a provocation that would elicit new such threats. There's no point in seeking to punish the West for its intransigence using military technology or military strategy. The main thing for Moscow is to maintain a robust policy of deterrence under any conceivable military, technological, and geopolitical conditions. Credible national security guarantees are not based on non-aggression pacts with a potential enemy, but on effective deterrence of any adversary.

Still, agreements can also be useful, if the terms are acceptable. The recent flurry of negotiations is just one round of the complex strategic game currently playing out before the world's eyes. The United States and NATO have promised to present Russia with their own counterproposals (read: counterdemands). Backstage, the U.S. Congress is discussing new sanctions, the Kremlin is compiling a raft of countersanctions, and the Russian Defense Ministry is carrying out a joint exercise with the Belarusian armed forces. Major power relations remain essentially a power play.

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