

Putin's Ultimatum: Aggressor Demands Security Guarantees

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One of the main international problems continuing into the new year is the Ukrainian crisis and continued standoff over its settlement. Russia has been threatening Ukraine by amassing approximately 100,000 troops in its border since October 2021, which has created a risk of large-scale war in Eastern Europe and caused serious concerns in the West. In December it became clear that Moscow's ambitions are not limited to Ukraine, and it pursues greater goals. In that month the Russian government extended to the US and NATO two separate agreement proposals resembling ultimatums and demanded an immediate start to negotiations over these texts. The parties agreed to negotiations, and they will be held between January 10th to 13th of this year in three separate formats i.e., between the US and Russia, NATO and Russia as well as within the framework of the OSCE. In this article we will elaborate on the content and meaning of the Russian proposals to the US and NATO and their possible impact on the fate of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. We will also discuss the reasons behind the timing of Moscow's radical demands as well as the West's response to them.

Russian Proposal: Yalta 2.0

The draft [agreement](#) prepared by Putin's government between the Russian Federation and the US is quite short. In fact, the essence of the draft treaty is revealed in the following sentence of the first article: "The Parties shall not implement security measures adopted by each Party individually or in the framework of an international organization, military alliance or coalition that could undermine core security interests of the other Party." In the following articles this sentence is specified. The fourth article says that "the US

shall undertake to prevent further eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and deny accession to the Alliance to the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and shall not establish military bases in the territory of the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, use their infrastructure for any military activities or develop bilateral military cooperation with them." According to the fifth article "the Parties shall refrain from flying heavy bombers equipped for nuclear or non-nuclear armaments or deploying surface warships of any type, including in the framework of international organizations, military alliances or coalitions, in the areas outside national airspace and national territorial waters respectively, from where they can attack targets in the territory of the other party." In the sixth article the parties, apart from refraining from the deployment of ground-launched intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles outside their national territories, commit to avoid basing them in the areas of their own national territories, from which such weapons can attack targets in the national territory of the other party. The seventh article stipulates that the parties will refrain from deploying nuclear weapons outside their national territories and return such weapons already deployed outside their national territories to their national territories.

The [Agreement](#) on Measures to Ensure the Security of The Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is in fact extension of the aforementioned bilateral draft agreement with the US to other members of NATO. This is because Russia believes that the US may withdraw from the agreement whenever it deems necessary if the agreement is only bilateral. The proposed unilateral commitments of the US like preventing further expansion of NATO, rejection of membership to further former Soviet republics into the alliance and exclusion of any military

activities in their territories (except those who are already NATO members – Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), in this document are imposed on the military alliance at large.

The essence of both documents is a Russian demand for revision and rearrangement of the results of the Cold War, and it proposes to the US a new demarcation of spheres of influence, in fact, what we may call a new Yalta agreement. So far, Russia has several times declared this attitude both officially and non-officially. The starting point for this ambition was Vladimir Putin's famous Munich [speech](#) in February 2007. Subsequently, after that manifesto-style speech, Russia made military incursions first against Georgia, which had chosen the path of Euro-Atlantic integration (2008), and then against Ukraine after the pro-Russian leadership of the country was toppled by a popular uprising (2014). That is to say, it is no secret that Putin's Russia imagines a new security arrangement in Europe; however, the principal novelty of these late 2021 demands is that it is the first time that Moscow has proposed this vision be accepted by the other side as written legal commitments. The most important detail is that Russia demands a quick acceptance of its proposals by its counterparts. Putin [urged](#) against long-lasting negotiations on this matter, and he expects that Russia will be provided with security guarantees immediately. While [declaring](#) that these guarantees are "a matter of life and death" for Russia, presidential aid Dmitri Peskov, Foreign Minister Sergei [Lavrov](#), his deputy Aleksandr [Grushko](#), the head of the Russian Delegation to the Negotiations on Military Security and Arms Control in Vienna Konstantin [Gavrilov](#) and other officials have announced that Russia will resort to a military response with a seriousness commensurate with their intentions.

Why now?

The reasons why Russia now, long after the end of the Cold War, raises before the West these radical demands are an interesting matter. First of all, it should be noted that

Putin considers the West a declining civilization. Everyone who follows Russian politics is aware of multiple statements, speeches and opinions of this character voiced by Russian government officials and parliamentarians in recent years. Naturally, this view of the West is expressed in Russia's renewed National Security Strategy. This strategy [document](#) underlines that the Western liberal model is in crisis, and the US is characterized as a power losing its global leadership status. The US's failure in Afghanistan and the widely criticized and disastrous withdrawal of its troops only strengthened this view further. Thus, according to Russia's political-military elite, the declining power (the US) must recognize and accept interests of the rising power (Russia).

A deepening socio-political polarization in the US also plays into Russian hands. Moscow and the rest of the world have watched how tensions in the US have risen year after year. Such tensions, alongside the rise of isolationist nationalism, are one of the important factors that ultimately have caused the superpower to become increasingly isolated, weakening its traditional reflexes on international issues.

The US has declared China its primary strategic rival and has made engagement in the Indo-Pacific region its top priority, but Moscow now opens a second front because Russia believes that the US does not have enough resources for rivalry on two fronts. This emboldens Moscow to believe that Washington does not have the luxury to reject Russia's demands in this complicated situation.

The Kremlin has assumed President Biden's relatively soft stance against Nord Stream-2 as weakness. Moreover, contrary to his promises and rhetoric during the election campaign, his overall Russia policy has not been as hard of a line as expected, again leading to Moscow's interpretation that Biden holds a weak hand against Russia. Last year there were intensive contacts between the two countries. High ranking officials in the Biden administration, such as Under Secretary

of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and CIA Director William Burns visited Russia.

The fact that Russia has hardened its stance on Ukraine and the West in the past few months is naturally a matter of concern for the Biden administration. We can view Russia's new demands as an attempt by Putin, after failed negotiations, to use the threat of military force in order to push the other side to reach an agreement.

Nevertheless, the undisguised warnings of a military response if Russian demands are not met should be assessed as a tactical move aiming to intimidate and convince the West of the importance of compromise. In Moscow they believe that the US is neither militarily nor psychologically ready to face Russia militarily, and this perspective especially intimidates Europeans and Americans. In addition, in Western societies many assume that the current tensions are due to the Ukrainian crisis; those who think a conflict with Russia over Ukraine is worthwhile are in the minority. Russia is aware of the European and American publics' desire to avoid conflict, and its propaganda plays to this desire.

In other words, Russia believes that the timing is reasonable, and it can get concessions on some of its demands from the West, which is why the country has escalated tensions and now threatens military conflict.

Western Response

Even before the negotiations started, the US, NATO and the EU made it clear that the Russian demands concerning NATO are unacceptable. The US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken [said](#) "that one country does not have the right to dictate the policies of another or to tell that country with whom they may associate ... One country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history." The General Secretary of NATO Jens Stoltenberg [shared](#) this views and High Representative of the

European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Joseph Borrell likewise [said](#) that Russia's demands are unacceptable.

Putin, of course, knows that the US and NATO will not accept his maximalist demands such as the withdrawal of the US from Eastern Europe and the Baltic-Black seas regions, the removal of all nuclear weapons from Europe and the discontinuation of the containment policy against Moscow's aggressive behavior in Russia's immediate neighborhood and elsewhere. By amassing troops on the Ukrainian border, by suggesting that he is ready for another invasion, and by raising his radical demands before the West, Putin calculates that he can finish this stage of the standoff with some minimal gains. And those gains might include a Western compromise on Ukraine. There is a legal mechanism for that i.e., forcing Ukraine to implement provisions of the 2014-5 [Minsk agreements](#) according to Russian demands. If the West is going to accommodate Russia in this fashion, then the US and Europe could send a message to local and international publics that they are not (re)delimiting spheres of influence with Russia, but rather assuring that Ukraine implements the agreement it concluded with Russia. Currently Ukraine is the main front of geopolitical rivalry in the post-Soviet area, so if this country loses Western support and is forced to stop its integration with the Euro-Atlantic zone, this will inevitably have a negative impact on Georgia and all other post-Soviet countries apart from the Baltics. Currently other post-Soviet countries which are members of the Council of Europe and the OSCE (Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia) are not pursuing a policy of institutional integration with NATO, though as sovereign states, they have the right to do so. The failure of Ukraine and Georgia in pursuing their strategic choices could prevent them from making similar choices in the future. This kind of situation means that the whole of post-Soviet space, apart from the Baltics, will fall under full Russian influence.

Moscow openly states that the alternative to acceptance of its demands is military escalation. The US, for its part, warns

Russia that if the latter resorts to military intervention in Ukraine, it will face painful counter-measures. President Biden in his phone conversation with Putin on the last day of 2021 [conveyed](#) this message once more. Secretary of State Blinken and other US officials warned that Russia will face unprecedented sanctions. However, questions remain about the effectiveness of these warnings. First of all, it is important to note that despite the fact that Ukraine has already become a victim of the direct and indirect aggression of Russia in 2014, it is strange to see that the West is acting like it is surprised. This proves once more that the US and EU have so far avoided particularly biting sanctions against Russian, which might have earlier influenced Russian policy and that they have only begun discussing real sanctions now – almost eight years after the start of the Ukrainian crisis. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand what the effect of new sanctions might be given Russia's resilience; and what slow-acting sanctions could possibly change if Russia begins a new stage of its military intervention in Ukraine and occupies new territories, or if it destroys Ukrainian strategic military targets, command centers, ammunition depots with rocket-aviation strikes without even deploying ground forces?

There is yet another possible scenario: Russia may strike from within Ukraine – from already occupied territories and recapture parts of Luhansk and Donetsk regions which are now controlled by the Ukrainian army, or retake strategically important Mariupol and then declare that they have nothing to do with it and that this operation was conducted by the so-called local militia (*opolcheniye*). In this case, will the US and Europe assess Russian-influenced action as a direct military incursion of Russia and adequately respond, or will they act as if nothing serious has happened and continue their negotiations with Russia in the Normandy format, thus treating the aggressor as a mediator? Will Ukraine be provided with necessary arms such as *Patriots* to strengthen its anti-missile and air-defense capabilities? There are no obvious answers to

these questions.

The West's approach is still not adequate to the situation, and it is problematic.

The absurdity of the Ukrainian crisis is that the country that actually breached the territorial integrity of another country by occupying and seizing the internationally recognized territories of that country (the Crimean Peninsula), and devised the conflict in other parts of the same country (the Donbas region), now demands security guarantees for itself and threatens military conflict if its demands are rejected. It is near tragicomic that Russia itself in 1994 pledged security guarantees to Ukraine within the framework of [Budapest memorandum](#) it signed together with the US and UK.

We can already now, before negotiations have started, begin to elaborate on some of the initial results of Russia's blackmail of its neighbor and the West. The first result is that after Russia amassed its troops on Ukrainian border in the spring of 2021, the country received increased attention from a US administration that declaredly has China as its main adversarial focus. Since that time, Biden has had two conversations with Putin (one personally, another in an online format), has twice talked to him by phone and has sent his emissaries to Moscow, plus he has proposed amendments to the military budget envisaging that new sanctions against Russia are dropped. Second, the US together with its European allies have agreed to discuss Putin's ultimatum and [promised](#) not to station any offensive arms in Ukraine. Russia calculates that by threatening Ukraine and the West with the use of military force, it can get gains behind the diplomatic table. It is again tragicomic that the preamble to the Russian draft agreements delivered to the US and NATO indicates, with reference to principles of international law, that the use of military force and threats of military solutions are unacceptable in bilateral and multilateral international relations and that all the disputes should be resolved

peacefully. This is to say that Russia says one thing and does another: It threatens a military solution while also declaring that such threats are unacceptable.

It is also worthy of mention that Russia has already agreed to terms that are not in line with what it proposes in its new 2021 draft agreements with the US and NATO. The 1997 *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation* stipulates the foundation of a common stability and a security zone without any references to demarcation lines and spheres of influence which could limit the sovereignty of European countries.

It seems that Western leaders have underestimated Putin, who, driven by revanchist instincts, has become more bellicose when not resisted. Russia's warnings made in 2008 at NATO's Bucharest Summit and [voiced](#) personally by Putin at the NATO-Russia Council meeting were taken into account. Ukraine and Georgia were denied a NATO *Membership Action Plan*. Yet this did not stop Russia from taking further aggressive steps against Georgia in that same year and then against Ukraine. On the contrary, that denial pushed him toward expansionism. If the West leaves Ukraine alone to face Russia and does not block Putin's neo-imperial sphere of influence, no one can guarantee that new demands from Moscow will not follow. For now, Russia may be satisfied with taking Ukraine under its indirect control, however, there is no doubt that it will patiently choose an appropriate moment to raise other demands.

The Threat to Azerbaijan's Sovereignty

As expected, among the post-Soviet states under potential threat, only Georgia along with Ukraine [raised](#) objections to the Russian claim that post-Soviet space should be recognized as Moscow's exclusive sphere of interest. Moldovan President Maia Sandu [declared](#) that due to the country's constitutional neutrality, it does not seek membership in NATO; however, the country intends to join the EU. Other post-Soviet states have

kept silent while attempts were made to decide their fate without their participation. The security guarantees Russia demands are direct violations of national sovereignty and the right of all post-Soviet countries to choose their path of development. The 7th article of the Russian draft agreement proposed to NATO states that "the Parties that are member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization shall not conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine as well as other States in Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia." The military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Turkey, a NATO member, would be impacted by the 7th article as well. This article prevents any additional Azerbaijani-Turkish military cooperation beyond what is already done. For instance, it makes impossible the establishment of permanent Turkish military bases in Azerbaijan. Moreover, if Azerbaijan does not show any desire to join NATO today, it does not mean that such will be the case in the future. While this topic has not received any amount of public discussion in Azerbaijan, remaining securely outside the spotlight of both local officials and the public, the security guarantees Russia demands are against the national interests and sovereignty of Azerbaijan, and therefore should be a matter of public debate.