

# Seven Actions Russia Must Take Before Receiving Another Meeting with NATO

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

With his aggression, Russian President Putin has undone the post-World War II world order and undermined America's strategic interests in many parts of the world.

The Biden Administration should support a NATO-Russia meeting only once Russia meets seven non-negotiable conditions proving that it has become a responsible actor.

President Biden should reiterate that NATO's open-door policy is not up for negotiation, nor does Russia have a veto right over any nation's membership in NATO.

In December 2021, President Joe Biden reportedly offered to convene a meeting between North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and Russian President Vladimir Putin “to discuss the future of Russia’s concerns relative to NATO writ large.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, the Kremlin is unhappy with the close relationship between NATO and Kyiv, and the possibility of Ukraine someday becoming a member of the Alliance.

This offer of a meeting comes on the heels of a large-scale Russian military mobilization on Ukraine’s borders, a Kremlin-backed and Kremlin-manufactured migrant crisis along Poland’s, Latvia’s, and Lithuania’s borders with Belarus, a Moscow-inspired natural-gas shortage in Eastern Europe, and regular Russian-sponsored cyberattacks against the U.S. and its allies. Proposing a meeting between NATO and Russia under the current circumstances is a diplomatic blunder by the Biden Administration.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5240>

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Rather than offering to meet without preconditions, the U.S. should support a meeting only once Russia meets certain conditions. Furthermore, if Russia meets the conditions and this meeting comes to fruition, it should take place only through the NATO–Russia Council (NRC) that includes all 30 members of the Alliance. A discussion that leaves a majority of members out, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe, would only embolden Putin to make more aggressive demands and undermine NATO collective defense at a time when allied trust in President Biden has cratered.

The Biden Administration should clarify the U.S. position as supporting a meeting of the NRC *only* once certain conditions are met. Furthermore, the President should reiterate that NATO’s open-door policy is not up for negotiation, nor does Russia have a veto right over any nation’s membership in NATO. President Biden should tread carefully, making sure that a diplomatic blunder does not become a monumental mistake.

## NATO–Russia Engagement

The 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (NATO–Russia Founding Act) created the NATO–Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) in part “to build increasing levels of trust, unity of purpose and habits of consultation and cooperation between NATO and Russia.”<sup>2</sup> The PJC was replaced by the NRC in 2002 as a result of the declaration on “NATO–Russia Relations: A New Quality.” The declaration states that “[t]he NATO–Russia Council will serve as the principal structure and venue for advancing the relationship between NATO and Russia.”<sup>3</sup> Typically, NRC meetings occur at the level of ambassador, foreign minister, or defense minister, rarely at the heads of state and government level. The last such NRC meeting, which was attended by President Barack Obama, took place in November 2010 after the NATO Lisbon Summit.<sup>4</sup>

In April 2014, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO suspended

all practical cooperation between NATO and Russia including that which took place in the framework of the NRC. However, the Alliance agreed to keep channels of communication open in the NRC and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council at the Ambassadorial level and above, to allow the exchange of views, first and foremost on the crisis in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

After a two-year suspension, NRC meetings resumed in 2016,<sup>6</sup> with 10 meetings occurring between 2016 and 2019, the last in July 2019.<sup>7</sup> In February 2020, NATO proposed a further NRC meeting, a proposal that Russia has yet to accept.

In October 2021, Russia suspended its mission to NATO after the Alliance withdrew the accreditation of eight Russian intelligence officers working at the Russian mission in Brussels.<sup>8</sup> Shortly thereafter, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated the Alliance's willingness to convene an NRC meeting.<sup>9</sup> While NATO–Russia meetings at the political level have not taken place since 2019, military-to-military engagement has continued. For example, in February 2020, General Tod Wolters, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe met his Russian counterpart in Baku, Azerbaijan, to aid in transparency and deconfliction measures.<sup>10</sup> While the usefulness of consistent military-to-military engagement is evident, the U.S. government's and NATO's willingness to continue NRC meetings despite Russia's egregious actions is ill considered.

Russia prefers that issues related to NATO–Russian relations and the future of Ukraine be decided between the U.S. and Russia or with a small cadre of large European nations and the United States. The Biden Administration must resist the temptation to assent to such a format. Any discussion on NATO–Russian relations should be conducted through the NRC format; furthermore, the U.S. must insist that any discussions on the future of Ukraine include Ukraine at the table as an equal partner.

## Putin Cannot Be Trusted

Putin's behavior resembles that of the czars more than that of his Soviet predecessors. Everything this imperial leader does aims to maximize and secure his personal power. The impact of his reign has been bad for Russia. In recent years, democracy has been in retreat, basic freedoms (of speech, assembly, and a free press) have been eroded, minority groups and political opposition figures are often oppressed—and sometimes killed—and the country's economy is in tatters.

To distract his people from their many woes, Putin has pursued a dangerously aggressive and expansionist foreign policy. Along the way, he has undone the post–World War II world order and undermined America's strategic interests in many parts of the world.

Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and continues to occupy, illegally, 20 percent of that country's internationally recognized territory. Six years later, Putin invaded Ukraine and illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula—the

first time one European country used military force to annex part of another since the days of Hitler. Russia still fuels a separatist conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine that did not exist before 2014. Since April 2021, Russia has been stationing troops along the eastern border of Ukraine for a potential invasion. Its troop numbers currently sit at more than 94,000,<sup>11</sup> and that number could increase to 175,000<sup>12</sup> in the coming weeks.

Russia has sowed anxiety and instability throughout most of the rest of Europe, as well. It has weaponized its natural gas exports to Europe, turning off the tap when countries dare go against its wishes. NATO's members and partners have been under constant cyberattack. Russia has used banned chemical weapons as part of assassination attempts of political opposition leaders and Russian dissidents across Europe. Russia has constantly meddled in elections in the United States and across Europe in an attempt to undermine legitimate state structures and democratic processes. Russia has even gone as far as to conduct military exercises simulating a nuclear strike against NATO member Poland.

## Not Worthy of a NATO Meeting

When Russia decided in March 2014 to illegally annex Crimea and invade the Donbas region of Ukraine, it proved once again that it was no longer a trustworthy actor in the transatlantic community. NATO duly ceased meeting with Russia in the formal NRC format, but only briefly, with meetings resuming in 2016.

Before Russia is invited to meet with NATO at the head of state level, Moscow must—at a minimum—meet the following seven conditions. Russia must:

1. **Fully restore Ukraine's internationally recognized territory.**

Ukraine's internationally recognized territory includes the Crimean Peninsula and the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. From these two regions, Russia must remove all its troops, mercenaries, and security officials. Moscow must also introduce a robust disarming and demobilization program for Russian-backed separatists it has trained, funded, and equipped in these regions.

2. **Pay full compensation and economic reparations to Ukraine for its actions since 2014.**

At the time of occupation, Crimea alone accounted for 4 percent of Ukraine's gross domestic product. In 2021, Ukraine's Center for Economic Strategy assessed the economic damage of Crimea's annexation alone to be \$135 billion.<sup>13</sup>

3. **Release all Ukrainian political prisoners who have been held since 2014.** Today, Russia holds more than 100 political prisoners from Ukraine,<sup>14</sup> including at least 46 Crimean Tatars.<sup>15</sup>
4. **Formally apologize to the Crimean Tatars for their treatment during Russia's occupation of Crimea.** The Crimean Tatars are a Sunni-Muslim and ethnically Turkic minority group who have encountered much religious and political persecution by the Russians. In June 2018, five Crimean Tatar activists were jailed for their involvement in anti-Russia protests in February 2014—before Russia annexed Crimea.<sup>16</sup> In March 2019, 23 Crimean Tatar activists were imprisoned for associating with the Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), which is legal in Ukraine but banned in Russia.<sup>17</sup> In August 2021, five Tatar men were detained for no given reason.<sup>18</sup>
5. **Acknowledge responsibility for the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014 and suitably compensate the families of those killed in the incident.** MH17 was en route from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. When the plane was flying over eastern Ukraine, Russian soldiers fired a missile from the 53rd anti-aircraft missile brigade, shooting it down, motivation unknown. A total of 298 people from 17 countries died as a result. In May 2018, a Joint Investigation Team consisting of experts from Australia, Belgium, Malaysia, and Ukraine found Russia to be responsible for the tragedy, and in June 2019, four men who allegedly caused the crash were charged with murder.<sup>19</sup>
6. **Fully comply with the 2008 Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement with Georgia** regarding the two occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region. More than a decade after the cease-fire ended, Russia still has not lived up to its side of the bargain: (1) Russian military forces must pull back to their locations before the start of hostilities and (2) Russia must provide free access to humanitarian-aid groups. There are several thousand Russian troops stationed in these occupied regions,<sup>20</sup> which total up to 20 percent of Georgia's internationally recognized territory.
7. **Russia must cease all meddling in the domestic elections of the U.S. and its allies.** All 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Russia was behind the meddling during the 2016 U.S. presidential

campaign,<sup>21</sup> and the U.S. National Intelligence Council assessed with high confidence that Russia attempted to interfere in the 2020 presidential campaign.<sup>22</sup> Similar accusations have been made against Russia concerning elections in Germany, France, and Italy, among others.

## Unwittingly Wading into Dangerous Waters

The Biden Administration's offer of a meeting "to discuss the future of Russia's concerns relative to NATO writ large" is a highwire act that could easily play into Putin's hands by lending credence to false Russian propaganda narratives. Before engaging with Russia any further, the Biden Administration should:

- **Reiterate that the NATO-membership door remains open.** It is likely that Putin will want a concession from President Biden that Ukraine will not become a member of NATO any time soon. Instead, President Biden must send a clear message that NATO's open-door policy remains firmly in place for those countries that meet the criteria set out in Article 10 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. This includes Ukraine.
- **Make clear that Russia does not have a veto on NATO membership.** Russia should never be seen as having a veto over a country's membership in NATO, including Ukraine. Just because a country was once occupied by the Soviet Union or under the domination of the Russian Empire does not mean that it is blocked from joining the Alliance in perpetuity.
- **Only agree to meet under the auspices of the NATO–Russia Council and consult widely with allies—especially in Eastern Europe.** Any potential future meeting should only take place through the formal auspices of the NRC, and only after Russia has met the conditions listed in this *Issue Brief*. Any meeting with Russia that includes only select allies would be a strategic mistake with historical undertones echoing an idea that large powers should decide the fate of small nations. The U.S. should consult widely with allies on relations with Russia, including those Eastern European nations most impacted by ongoing Russian aggression.
- **Engage Russia from a position of strength.** Since entering office, President Biden has signaled weakness, proposing cuts to the U.S.

defense budget, acquiescing to the economically unnecessary and strategically imprudent Nord Stream 2 pipeline, as well as presiding over a humiliating and botched withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Administration must approach any discussions with Russia from a position of strength.

## Russia Has a Long Way to Go

Under the current circumstances, President Biden is wrong to suggest that Moscow should be awarded a high-level meeting with NATO. The NRC should only meet again at the heads of state/government level once Russia demonstrates that it is a responsible and collegiate actor in the transatlantic community. Realistically, this is unlikely to occur while Putin is in power. The Russian people will continue to suffer, and Russian influence on the international stage will continue to be marginalized. Now is the time for U.S. leadership and strength—not weakness and meekness.

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