

Seven Rules for Exiting Misplaced U.S. and NATO Talks with Russia

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia has ramped up its aggression in Europe in an effort to force the U.S. and its allies back to the negotiating table while offering no concessions.

The Biden Administration must now seek to exit these unwise talks while working to bolster collective defense and Ukraine's ability to defend itself.

The Administration must not concede support for NATO's open-door policy, aid for Ukraine, continued exercises with allies, or the U.S. presence in Europe.

In the past two months, Vladimir Putin has ramped up the pressure in Europe in a bid to force the U.S. and its allies back to the negotiating table. Russia has staged 100,000 troops along the border with Ukraine, threatening to unleash new aggression against Ukraine unless Russian demands are met. Belarus, Russia's ally, continues to pressure Eastern European nations through hybrid attacks that include the weaponization of migrant flows. In the Balkans, Russia continues to foment separatism and unrest, while closer to home it has unleashed its position as energy kingmaker in Europe to divide the continent.

The U.S. would have been wise not to walk willingly into an obvious trap¹ and to eschew top-level meetings with Russia until the Putin regime met certain preconditions.² Regardless, this week, the U.S. will meet with Russia in several high-level

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formats following an opening round of bilateral talks in Geneva, which took place on Monday. The U.S. will also take part in a meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)–Russia Council on Wednesday, and a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (of which both Russia and the U.S. are participating states) on Thursday.

Russia has entered the talks wielding a list of demands, rather than approaching with a series of positions to be negotiated in good faith. Russia is offering no concessions aside from presumably worthless promises to de-escalate tensions in Ukraine, which have been manufactured for the express purpose of forcing the West back to the negotiating table. The U.S. and its allies cannot and must not negotiate with Russia at the point of a gun. The U.S. must approach future discussions with Russia from a position of strength, following seven rules for exiting the current flurry of discussions with minimum damage.

How the U.S. Got to This Point

The Biden Administration has sent all the wrong signals since day one. After Russia's May 2021 hack of the Colonial Pipeline in the U.S., which temporarily knocked a major thoroughfare for gasoline and jet fuel in the Eastern and Southern U.S. offline, President Joe Biden assured the public of an aggressive response, yet none has been publicly verified.³ After unilaterally capitulating on the Russian Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the Biden Administration engineered the humiliating and disorderly retreat from Afghanistan. Then, throughout the summer and fall, it sent a steady stream of envoys to Moscow, signaling a near-desperate desire for accommodation.

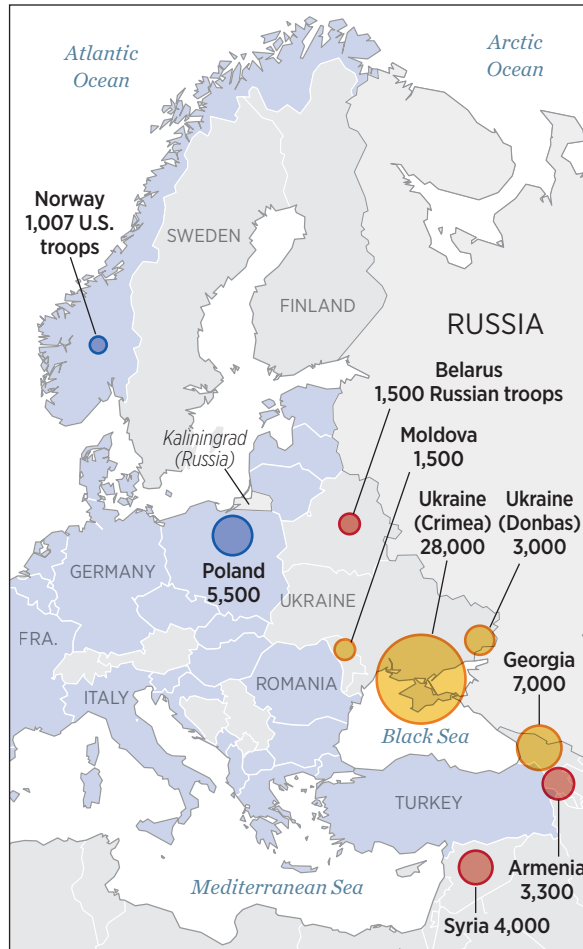
Putin, who views President Biden as fundamentally weak, is seeking to seize a window of opportunity to force concessions from the West. Many U.S. allies who have been deeply dismayed by U.S. leadership under President Biden, particularly the lack of consultations about the Afghan withdrawal (to say nothing of the botched withdrawal itself), are worried. Recent reports⁴ that the Biden Administration is considering offering Russia reduced exercises and troop deployments to Eastern Europe, while quickly denied by the Administration, has many allies worried about upcoming talks. Countries in Eastern Europe well remember being stabbed in the back by the Obama Administration over a decade ago in regard to ballistic missile defense deployments.

MAP 1

U.S. Troops Vastly Outnumbered by Russian Troops Outside Russia's Borders

U.S. troops in Norway and Poland number less than 7,000—far fewer than Russia's 48,300 troops that are, for all intents and purposes, stationed permanently outside its borders on NATO's perimeter.

- NATO nations
- U.S. troops in NATO nations adjacent to Russia
- Russian troops
- Russian troops in occupied territories



SOURCES: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London: Routledge, 2021); U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center; and Heritage Foundation research.

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Russia Uses Myths to Buffer Its Case for Concessions

To bolster its demands for concessions, Russia likes to rely on a few crucial myths, among them that the U.S. gave verbal assurances to Russia on limits to NATO expansion, that the 1997 NATO Russia Founding Act prohibits the establishment of permanent military bases in former Warsaw Pact countries that are now NATO members, and that NATO has “encircled Russia.”

On the issue of basing troops in former Warsaw Pact countries, the 1997 agreement states:

NATO reiterates that *in the current and foreseeable security environment*, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.⁵ (Emphasis added.)

When reading the phrase “in the current and foreseeable security environment,” it is important to remember that Russia and NATO agreed to this act 25 years ago. Moscow’s commitment to Euro-Atlantic security has changed since the days of goodwill in 1997, and Putin has chosen a path for Russia that is different from the one chosen by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. This alone justifies permanently basing NATO troops in Central and Eastern Europe.

Regarding the Russian myth of encirclement, NATO notes that

NATO is a defensive alliance, whose purpose is to protect our member states. Our exercises and military deployments are not directed against Russia—or any other country. This myth also ignores geography. Russia’s land border is just over 12,000 miles long. Of that, less than one sixteenth (750 miles), is shared with NATO members. Russia has land borders with 14 countries. Only five of them are NATO members.⁶

Putin is also fond of painting the U.S. forces as menacingly threatening Russia, however, in reality, the paltry number of U.S. forces permanently based in nations bordering Russia (and invited their by allies) are far fewer than the number of Russian forces permanently based outside Russian borders on NATO’s perimeter (and in the cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine there via occupation not invitation).

The U.S. and Its Allies Have the Advantage of Time

Time may be on the side of the U.S. and its allies: Russia cannot, for domestic financial and political reasons, maintain its massive buildup near Ukraine indefinitely; nor can it ignore that in a few weeks, winter will recede in Ukraine (thus making defense easier), that Ukrainian forces continue to field new systems that will make further incursion more costly, or that its intervention in Kazakhstan has changed some of the geopolitical calculus.

Having agreed to talks with Russia, the U.S. and its allies must exit them with as little damage as possible, then set about the task of further bolstering NATO’s collective defense and Ukraine’s ability to defend itself. Therefore, in this week’s talks, the Biden Administration should adhere to the following seven rules. The U.S. must:

1. Not offer to close NATO's door, even halfway. The key concession that Putin demands is an assurance that additional nations, especially Ukraine, will never be allowed to join NATO. The U.S. and its allies 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. While the Administration may be tempted to offer up a moratorium on new membership in exchange for de-escalation (especially for nations that are far from ready to join), such guarantees are not only wrong in principle, but Russia would also pressure the Alliance to extend such a moratorium in perpetuity, thereby receiving a de facto veto on enlargement.

2. Not sacrifice invaluable training exercises with European partners. Russia's list of demands includes proposals for the "withdrawal of areas of operational exercises at an agreed distance from the Russia – NATO contact line" alongside complaints about U.S. and allied exercises in the Black Sea. America's greatest asset is its network of alliances, and the grease that keeps those alliances humming from a military standpoint are regular training exercises, which help allies to develop cohesiveness and joint operational awareness, while stress testing command and control, new capabilities, and tactics.

3. Not allow Russia to dictate when, where, and with whom the U.S. exercises. Russia cannot be allowed to dictate the terms of U.S. interactions with its allies, including Ukraine. NATO-led training exercises in western Ukraine have helped to create a professional and capable Ukrainian military, which is why Russia wants them stopped. However, continuing them is in NATO's long-term interest.

4. Not negotiate Ukraine's right to self-defense. Ukraine, which Russia invaded, has a right to self-defense. As authorized by successive National Defense Authorization Acts, the U.S. should appropriate funds to increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military, including more anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and small arms with fewer, or more flexible, restrictions. As the right to self-defense does not stop at the shoreline, the U.S. should seek ways to support the development and capabilities of the Ukrainian navy.

5. Not pull U.S. troops from Europe. U.S. troops remain in Europe first and foremost because it is in U.S. national security interests. The presence of U.S. forces in Europe contributes to the collective defense of U.S. allies on the continent serving as the rock on which the Alliance has been built. Basing forces in Europe offers a plethora of benefits, including broader and swifter options for U.S. policymakers. Any agreement to draw down U.S.

forces would signal extreme weakness, undermine NATO's Article 5 guarantee, and confirm to Putin that he would be free to establish a "sphere of influence" in Eastern Europe without fear of U.S. reprisal.

6. Not concede U.S. and NATO presence in Allied Eastern European countries. Another key concession demanded by Russia is the withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops and weapons systems from any NATO member that joined the Alliance after 1997.⁷ The U.S. and NATO should reject Russia's demands, which would affect nearly half the Alliance members,⁸ outright. Far from abandoning its Eastern European allies, the U.S. should establish a permanent military presence in Eastern Europe.

7. Not agree to vague promises, which the U.S. may regret in the future. While it may be tempting to concede to a Russian demand that is not immediately relevant, whether NATO membership for nowhere-near-ready countries, limits on the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons and intermediate-range systems in Europe, or even U.S. support for civil society in Russia and neighboring nations, guarantees made in haste may come back to haunt the U.S. in the decades to come. The world today looks much different than it did 25 years ago at the signing of the NATO Russia Founding Act, and it will surely look much different in 2047. Tying the hands of future U.S. policymakers for immediate expediency would be foolish.

Conclusion

With domestic problems mounting for President Biden, his Administration has shown a willingness to put foreign policy crises in the rearview mirror as quickly as possible, with little regard for the consequences. The debacle in Afghanistan is a tragic example. President Biden needs to resist the temptation to offer concessions to Russia to end the crisis in Ukraine. President Putin cannot be trusted and, as long as he remains in power, Russia cannot be a credible partner for the transatlantic community. Now is the time for U.S. leadership and strength—not for weakness and meekness.

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Endnotes

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