



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine

## Russia Seeks to Stop NATO's Expansion, Not to Annex More Territory

**BY DMITRI TRENIN    December 28, 2021**

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As 2021 came to a close, Russia presented the United States with a list of demands that it said were necessary to stave off the possibility of a large-scale military conflict in Ukraine. In a draft treaty delivered to a U.S. diplomat in Moscow, the Russian government asked for a formal halt to NATO's eastern enlargement, a permanent freeze on further expansion of the alliance's military infrastructure (such as bases and weapons systems) in the former Soviet territory, an end to Western military assistance to Ukraine, and a ban on intermediate-range missiles in Europe. The message was unmistakable: if these threats cannot be addressed diplomatically, the Kremlin will have to resort to military action.

These concerns were familiar to Western policymakers, who for years have responded by arguing that Moscow does not have a veto over NATO's decisions and that it has no grounds to demand that the West stop sending weapons to Ukraine. Until recently, Moscow grudgingly acceded to those terms. Now, however, it appears determined to follow through with countermeasures if it doesn't get its way. That determination was reflected in how it presented the proposed treaty with the United States and a separate agreement with NATO.

The tone of both missives was sharp. The West was given just a month to respond, which circumvented the possibility of prolonged and inconclusive talks. And both drafts were published almost immediately after their delivery, a move that was intended to prevent Washington from leaking and spinning the proposal.

If Russian President Vladimir Putin is acting as if he has the upper hand in this standoff, that's because he does. According to U.S. intelligence services, Russia has nearly 100,000 troops and a great deal of heavy weaponry stationed on the Ukrainian border. The United States and other NATO countries have condemned Russia's moves but simultaneously suggested that they will not defend Ukraine, which is not a NATO member, and have limited their threats of retaliation to sanctions.

But Moscow's demands are probably an opening bid, not an ultimatum. For all its insistence on a formal treaty with the United States, the Russian government no doubt understands that thanks to polarization and gridlock, ratification of any treaty in the U.S. Senate will be all but impossible. An executive agreement—essentially an accord between two governments which does not have to be ratified and thus does not have the status of a law—may therefore be a more realistic alternative. It is also likely that under such an agreement, Russia would assume reciprocal commitments addressing some U.S. concerns so as to create what it calls a “balance of interest.”

Specifically, the Kremlin could be satisfied if the U.S. government agreed to a formal long-term moratorium on expanding NATO and a commitment not to station intermediate-range missiles in Europe. It might also be assuaged by a separate accord between Russia and NATO that would restrict military forces and activity where their territories meet, from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Of course, it is an open question whether the Biden administration is willing to engage seriously with Russia. Opposition to any deal will be high in the United

States because of domestic political polarization and the fact that striking a deal with Putin opens the Biden administration to criticism that it is caving to an autocrat. Opposition will also be high in Europe, where leaders will feel that a negotiated settlement between Washington and Moscow leaves them on the sidelines.

These are all serious issues. But it's crucial to note that Putin has presided over four waves of NATO enlargement and has had to accept Washington's withdrawal from treaties governing anti-ballistic missiles, intermediate-range nuclear forces, and unarmed observation aircraft. For him, Ukraine is the last stand. The Russian commander-in-chief is supported by his security and military establishments and, despite the Russian public's fear of a war, faces no domestic opposition to his foreign policy. Most importantly, he cannot afford to be seen bluffing. Biden was right not to reject Russia's demands out of hand and to favor engagement instead.

### **PUTIN'S REDLINES**

There is significant asymmetry in the importance the West and Russia ascribe to Ukraine. The West did extend the prospect of NATO membership to the country in 2008, but without a formal timetable for admittance. After 2014—when Russia took over Crimea from Ukraine and began supporting pro-Russian militants in the country's Donbas region—it became difficult to see how the U.S. government would allow Ukraine to join NATO. After all, there would be little public support in the United States for deploying troops to fight for Ukraine. Washington is saddled with a promise to Kyiv that both sides know it cannot keep. Russia, by contrast, treats Ukraine as a vital national security interest and has professed its readiness to use military force if that interest is threatened. This openness to committing troops and geographic proximity to Ukraine give Moscow an advantage over the United States and its allies.

This does not mean a Russian invasion of Ukraine is imminent. Despite the Western media's predilection for depicting Putin as reckless, he is in fact

cautious and calculating, particularly when it comes to the use of force. Putin is not risk-averse—operations in Chechnya, Crimea, and Syria are proof of that—but in his mind, the benefit must outweigh the cost. He won't invade Ukraine simply because of its leaders' Western orientations.

That said, there are some scenarios that could prod the Kremlin to dispatch troops to Ukraine. In 2018, Putin publicly declared that a Ukrainian attempt to regain territory in the Donbas region by force would unleash a military response. There is historical precedence for this: in 2008, Russia responded militarily to a Georgian attack on the breakaway republic of South Ossetia. Another Russian redline is Ukraine's accession to NATO or the placement of Western military bases and long-range weapons systems on its territory. Putin will never yield on this point. For now, however, there is almost no support from the United States and other NATO members for letting Ukraine join the alliance. In early December 2021, U.S. State Department officials told Ukraine that NATO membership for that country is unlikely to be approved in the next decade.

If NATO were to build up its forces in the eastern member states, that could further militarize the new dividing line in Europe running along the western borders of Russia and Belarus. Russia could be provoked into placing more short-range missiles in Kaliningrad—the noncontiguous, westernmost part of Russia that is sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania. A closer military alliance with Belarus could put even more pressure on Ukraine. Moscow could also recognize the self-proclaimed “people's republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk and integrate them into a new geopolitical entity with Russia and Belarus.

The geopolitical implications of these developments could reverberate beyond Europe. To counter more drastic Western economic and financial sanctions, either in anticipation of a Russian incursion into Ukraine or as a consequence of it, Moscow may need to lean on Beijing, which also finds itself under increasing U.S. pressure. Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping are already discussing financial mechanisms to protect their countries from U.S. sanctions. In that case, Putin's

scheduled visit to China for the Winter Olympics in February 2022 might turn out to be more than a courtesy call. The United States could then see the current Chinese-Russian entente turning into a tighter alliance. Economic, technological, financial, and military cooperation between the two powers would reach new levels.

### **BLAME GAME**

Putin's threat to resort to force comes from his frustration with a stalled diplomatic process. The Kremlin's effort to entice Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to strike a deal on Donbas—which seemed promising as recently as late 2019—came to naught. Zelensky, who won the presidency in a landslide running as a peace candidate, is an exceptionally erratic leader. His decision to use armed drones in Donbas in 2021 ratcheted up tensions with Moscow at a time when Ukraine could not afford to provoke its neighbor.

It's not just Ukrainian leadership that Moscow sees as problematic. France and Germany have flubbed efforts to strike a diplomatic resolution to the Russia-Ukraine stalemate. The Europeans, who were the guarantors of the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 that were supposed to bring peace to the region, had little success pushing the Ukrainians to strike a deal. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, then foreign minister, could not even get Kyiv to accept a compromise that would have allowed for elections in the Donbas region. Last November, the Russians went so far as to publish private diplomatic correspondence between their foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and his French and German counterparts to demonstrate how the Western powers fully sided with Ukrainian government's stance.

And although the focus in the West has been on the Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border, this came as NATO countries expanded their military activities in the Black Sea region and in Ukraine. In June, a British destroyer sailed through territorial waters off Crimea, which London does not recognize as belonging to Russia, provoking the Russians to fire in its direction. In

November, a U.S. strategic bomber flew within 13 miles of the Russian border in the Black Sea region, infuriating Putin. As tensions rose, Western military advisers, instructors, arms, and ammunition poured into Ukraine. Russians also suspect that a training center the United Kingdom is constructing in Ukraine is in fact a foreign military base. Putin is particularly adamant that deploying U.S. missiles in Ukraine that can reach Moscow in five to seven minutes cannot and will not be tolerated.

For Russia, the escalating military threats were unmistakable. In his articles and speeches, Putin may emphasize the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, but what he cares most about is preventing NATO expansion in Ukraine. Consider what he said in March 2014 after sending forces into Crimea in response to the overthrow of Ukraine's president, Viktor Yanukovich. "I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors," he said of the famous Russian naval base in Crimea. "Of course, most of them are wonderful guys, but it would be better to have them come and visit us, be our guests, rather than the other way round."

Putin's actions suggest that his true goal is not to conquer Ukraine and absorb it into Russia but to change the post-Cold War setup in Europe's east. That setup left Russia as a rule-taker without much say in European security, which was centered on NATO. If he manages to keep NATO out of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and U.S. intermediate-range missiles out of Europe, he thinks he could repair part of the damage Russia's security sustained after the Cold War ended. Not coincidentally, that could serve as a useful record to run on in 2024, when Putin would be up for re-election.

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