



The Ukraine Crisis: There Is Still Room for Diplomacy

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Summary

- Confronting each other over the future of Ukraine, NATO and Russia are engaged in complicated diplomatic bargaining over security, power and the limits of the transatlantic alliance in Europe.
- Diplomacy can work toward a peaceful resolution of the Ukraine crisis, in spite of the heated public rhetoric. The US and the EU share a common objective in preventing a war in the short term and reaching an understanding with Russia in the longer term.
- The EU may not be at the negotiating table, but it is still actively involved in the diplomatic discussions. It plays an important role via deterrence and diplomacy in several fora, while France is steadily upgrading its geopolitical standing and pursuing a modus vivendi with Russia.
- Greece is closely monitoring the Ukrainian crisis and supports all de-escalation efforts. The presence of Greek diaspora communities in Ukraine is an important factor. So are Turkey's efforts to assume a mediating role between Ukraine and Russia with a view to upgrading its own NATO standing.

Introduction

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The November 2013 Maidan protest movement ushered in a new period for Ukraine and the relationship between the West and Russia. A potential Euro-Atlantic and European orientation for Ukraine has been envisaged by the country itself, but has consistently been considered anathema by Russia. The unfolding and continuous tensions occur in the framework of contradictory interpretations of the same aspiration in relation to US-Ukrainian military collaboration. For their part, the Minsk Agreements have not produced an outcome which allows the positions of Kiev and Moscow to be bridged. Approximately eight years since the annexation of Crimea, the protracted conflict in Ukraine has taken a dangerous turn. War scenarios are already part of the public conversation. The main reason has been the gradual massing of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine since October 2021. Moscow refutes speculation about an imminent war, which has largely been aired in English-language media, but Washington is making its own plans. On 19 January 2022, US President Joe Biden said his guess was that President Vladimir Putin “will move in.”¹ A few days later, he “reaffirmed the readiness of the US along with its allies and partners to respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine.”² In spite of public statements, however, ongoing meetings between American and Russian representatives behind closed doors display the common will for a diplomatic solution.

War Is No Solution

The new phase the Ukraine crisis has entered poses a dilemma for the main players, since the protection of the territorial integrity and sovereign choices of one country, Ukraine, clash with the security considerations of another, Russia. The common desideratum—in the short term—is the avoidance of conflict, or the adoption of measures that will privilege a diplomatic resolution to the standoff. Following the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, several countries are questioning the extent to which the US will be committed to taking action in defense of its allies in the future. Although President Biden has played down fears of a US withdrawal from Europe, the US has yet to put its commitments over Ukraine to the test. Washington has already shifted its attention toward the Indo-Pacific and is seeking a minimum level of understanding with Russia in relation to China’s global role.

The European position is rather similar: The EU does not want another war to erupt in its own backyard, accompanied by new waves of refugees and an even deeper energy crisis. The EU is aware that a outcome of this sort, though undesired, could still come about as a result of miscalculations and misjudgments. Washington and Brussels are therefore on the same page in acting to prevent the outbreak of a conflict and limit Russia’s capacity to impose its own agenda in Europe.

For Russia, it is also debatable whether an attack on Ukraine would serve its strategy in the long term. Along with the bloodshed and the economic cost of sustaining a military operation, a deepening of the rift between it and the West—both the US and the EU—would seriously impact on President’s Putin geopolitical strategy, which is arguably

¹ White House website, Remarks by President Biden at a Press Conference, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/01/19/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-6/>, 19 January 2022.

² White House website, Readout of President Biden’s Call with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/27/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-zelenskyy-of-ukraine-2/>, 27 January 2022.

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aimed at bringing about a new security architecture in Europe. An affirmation of NATO’s engagement—a development he wants to prevent—is another likely result. Needless to say, serious economic sanctions (which could even include disconnecting Russia from the SWIFT international payments system) would harm Russia’s national economy, while the future of the Nord Stream II pipeline would also be jeopardized.³ As far as Ukraine is concerned, war would come at a great cost. President Volodymyr Zelensky has called on the West not to create a panic harmful to the Ukrainian economy amidst the build-up of Russian troops on his country’s borders.⁴

The Power of Diplomacy: Where We Are

As war seems to benefit no one, diplomacy has been (operating) at fever pitch since December 2021. On 17 December, the Russian foreign ministry released two draft treaties on security guarantees for the US and NATO. Among other things, the draft agreements demanded that NATO should not expand any further eastwards, and that its member states “shall not conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine as well as other States in the Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia.” They also insisted on a ban on the deployment of serious offensive weapons and “on cooperation on the basis of principles of indivisible, equal and undiminished security.”⁵ The Kremlin links its so-called “indivisible security” notion to a 1999 charter signed in Istanbul by members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This stipulates that countries should be free to choose their own security arrangements and alliances, but also that they “will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other states.”⁶

The American response to Moscow was delivered on 26 January 2022. In the words of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, this response was “fully coordinated with Ukraine and [America’s] European allies and partners.”⁷ NATO also provided a written response to Russia. According to initial media reports, the US rejected core Russian demands but demonstrated a level of preparedness to discuss other concerns.⁸ Confidential documents published exclusively by *El País* on 2 February show that Washington remained committed to NATO’s Open Door policy and was prepared to discuss “the indivisibility of security,” but clarified that this “concept cannot be viewed in isolation” and ought to be placed in the context “of many commitments OSCE participating

³ Klaus Larres, ‘Is War in Ukraine Imminent? Putin’s Objectives and US and European Dilemmas,’ available at: https://www.krasnoevents.com/uploads/1/1/6/6/116679777/krasno_analysis_-_larres_on_war_in_ukraine_-_jan._2022.pdf, Krasno Analysis Weekly Spotlight, 31 January 2022.

⁴ BBC website, ‘Ukraine Crisis: Don’t Create Panic, Zelensky Tells West,’ available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60174684>, 30 January 2022.

⁵ See the proposed Treaty between the US and Russia on security guarantees, available at: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en, and the proposed agreement on measures to ensure the security of Russia and members of NATO, available at: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y, 17 December 2021.

⁶ Reuters website, ‘Russia Cites 1999 Charter Text for Insistence on Indivisible Security,’ available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-cites-1999-charter-text-insistence-indivisible-security-2022-02-01/>, 1 February 2022.

⁷ US Department of State website, Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability, available at: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-13/>, 26 January 2022.

⁸ Politico website, ‘US, NATO Deliver Written Replies to Russia on Security Demands,’ available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-delivers-written-reply-to-russia-on-security-demands/>, 26 January 2022.

“Confidential documents published exclusively by El Pais on 2 February show that Washington remained committed to NATO’s Open Door policy and was prepared to discuss “the indivisibility of security,” but clarified that this “concept cannot be viewed in isolation” and ought to be placed in the context “of many commitments OSCE participating countries have made.”

countries have made.”⁹ Further to this, the US and NATO expressed their will to begin discussions with Russia on arms control and trust-building measures. At the time of writing, Russia is drafting its own response, expecting “the commencement of a serious talk but on secondary issues.”¹⁰ In a letter addressed to his counterparts in the US, Canada and several European countries on 1 February, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov reiterated the need for a “clear answer” in relation to what he interprets as the recipients’ “obligation” “not to strengthen their own security at the expense of the security of other states on the basis of the commitment to the principle of indivisible security.”¹¹

Amidst tensions, NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea region, and the US is supplying Ukraine with military aid.¹² The seriousness of the disagreements between the two has led some scholars to ponder on the nature of a hypothetical Russian invasion against Ukraine. A *Foreign Affairs* essay, for example, discusses three options for a Russian attack. These are: a) formally recognizing or annexing the Donbas region, b) launching a limited campaign to seize additional territory in Eastern Ukraine, and c) staging a full-scale offensive, advancing on Kiev.¹³ Limited public information makes it highly risky to speculate, though. More importantly, the ongoing diplomatic bargaining between Washington and Moscow is generating some optimism that the crisis will be resolved peacefully. The US and Russia are in the process of elaborating on possible solutions, but without publicizing details: the diplomats’ mission is to deliver, irrespective of the public representation of a crisis.

The Role of the EU, and Greece

The feud between America and Russia puts the EU in a delicate position. Washington expects more action from Brussels, while Brussels struggles to bridge internal differences and develop a common approach to existing security threats and persuade Washington that EU policy would not be antithetical to US objectives. For its part, Moscow might welcome a more active European role, but surmises that the EU remains—for now—under the control of NATO when it comes to military security.¹⁴ Subsequently, Brussels has been criticized by some commentators for not being at the table. Even if the EU is not participating in the direct American-Russian negotiations, it is not absent from the broader, multi-layered set of diplomatic discussions. It is in regular contact with the US and NATO—with whom it is preparing the aforementioned responses—, as well as with the OSCE. High Representative Josep Borrell also remains in close touch with his French

⁹ *El Pais* website, ‘US Offered Disarmament Measures to Russia in Exchange for De-escalation of Military Threat in Ukraine,’ available at: <https://english.elpais.com/usa/2022-02-02/us-offers-disarmament-measures-to-russia-in-exchange-for-a-deescalation-of-military-threat-in-ukraine.html>, 2 February 2022.

¹⁰ TASS website, ‘US Gives no Positive Reply on Inadmissibility of NATO Expansion, Says Lavrov,’ available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1393941>, 27 January 2022.

¹¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation website, Text of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Mr. Sergey Lavrov’s Written Message on the Indivisibility of Security Addressed to the Heads of Foreign / External Affairs Ministers / Secretaries of the US, Canada and Several European Countries, available at: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1796679/,

¹² NATO website, Press Conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Pekka Haavisto, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden, Ann Linde, available at:

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_191039.htm, 24 January 2022 and CNN website, “Ukraine Receives Second Weapons Shipment from US,” available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/23/politics/ukraine-us-second-weapons-shipment/index.html>, 23 January 2022.

¹³ Alexander Vindman and Dominic Cruz Bustillos, ‘The Day After Russia Attacks,’ available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-01-21/day-after-russia-attacks>, 21 January 2022.

¹⁴ TASS website, ‘US Position on Security Guarantees to be Decisive in Russia’s Talks with NATO – Diplomat,’ available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1377787>, 19 December 2021.

and German colleagues within the Normandy format (France, Germany, Ukraine, Russia).¹⁵

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On 13-14 January 2022, EU foreign ministers met in Brest and talked about the need to pursue a policy based on two courses of action. The first was the adoption of a strong dissuasive position regarding challenges to principles fundamental to European security, territorial integrity and sovereignty; the option of possibly imposing large-scale sanctions was raised at the meeting. The second was fully supporting diplomatic initiatives and engaging in robust discussions with Russia.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, the leaders of France, Germany and Italy—namely, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and Mario Draghi—spoke to Vladimir Putin to push for de-escalation. The role of Macron, in particular, may be crucial, as France currently holds the rotating EU Council presidency. Ironically, the Russian-Georgian clash over South Ossetia broke out 14 years ago, when his predecessor Nicola Sarkozy was at Europe’s helm; if history repeats itself, it would damage Macron’s foreign policy legacy.

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Historically, the American contribution to European security has been invaluable, and the US continues to boost deterrence and facilitate diplomacy. France-led EU steps toward a common foreign and defense policy should not be dismissed as insignificant. In spite of well-known divergences between ‘old’ Europe and member-states such as Poland and the Baltic states with regard to how to deal with Russia, France is already making a difference in upgrading Europe’s all-round geopolitical presence.¹⁷ The Strategic Compass, scheduled for adoption in March, will further strengthen long-standing endeavors and increase the urgency of a common position. The current phase of the Ukrainian standoff will perhaps accelerate discussions between NATO and the EU, which are not always easy.¹⁸ As long as a common strategic culture is shared by the EU’s member states, a spirit of complementarity will characterize these discussions. The Alliance will benefit from a stronger European defense cooperation.¹⁹

Assessing the situation from a national perspective, the ongoing instability in Ukraine is causing concern in Greece, as it is in other EU member states. Greece remains steadily aligned with the EU and NATO. The visit of Greece’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias, to Mariupol on 31 January reflected national sensitivity to the Greek community that lives there.²⁰ The Greek government is also monitoring Turkey’s diplomatic efforts to mediate. Tayip Erdoğan’s visit to Kiev on 3 February was a first step, but no meeting between the Turkish President and Vladimir Putin had been arranged at

¹⁵ EEAS website, ‘With Tensions Rising at Our Eastern Borders, Unity Remains Our Strength,’ available at:

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/110293/tensions-rising-our-eastern-borders-unity-remains-our-strength_en, 30 January 2021.

¹⁶ French Presidency of the Council of the EU website, Informal Meeting of Foreign Ministers (Gymnich), available at:

<https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/press-release-informal-meeting-of-foreign-ministers-gymnich/>, 16 January 2022.

¹⁷ See the interview with George Pagoulaton on [iefimerida](https://www.iefimerida.gr/kosmos/pagoylatos-iefimerida-gallia-geostratigiki-ee), available at: <https://www.iefimerida.gr/kosmos/pagoylatos-iefimerida-gallia-geostratigiki-ee>, 61 January 2022 (in Greek).

¹⁸ Judy Dempsey, ‘What Ukraine Reveals About NATO and the EU,’ available at:

<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/86325>, 1 February 2022.

¹⁹ Ulrik Trolle Smed, ‘Complementarity without Competition: How NATO Can Benefit from Stronger European Defense Cooperation,’ available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/complementarity-without-competition-how-nato-can-benefit-from-stronger-european-defense-cooperation/>, 6 July 2018.

²⁰ Greece’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias’ statement to Greek journalists, following his contacts in Mariupol and Sartana, available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/top-story/minister-of-foreign-affairs-nikos-dendias-statement-to-greek-journalists-following-his-contacts-in-mariupol-and-sartana-ukraine-mariupol-31012022.html>, 31 January 2021.

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the time of writing—according to the Kremlin.²¹ While every effort to de-escalate tensions is welcome, there are some elements in Ankara’s desire to play such a substantial role that go beyond the legitimate purposes of political communication. On the whole, Greece values stability and calm in a period in which it has managed to mend its ties with Russia, following the visit of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to Sochi in December 2021.²² Greece’s commitment to extending the *pax Europaea* to Europe’s neighborhood is no different from that of the EU core—France, Germany and Italy—, but obviously the country also remains bound by NATO commitments to support its main ally, the US.

Conclusion

In a recent speech, Josep Borrell said that “We are living through the most dangerous moment of the post-Cold War period.”²³ A de-escalation in Ukraine will be a success in itself, and an indication of the diplomatic capacity of Brussels and Washington to lead peacefully in a changing world order. It is their responsibility to persuade Moscow that the damage mutually inflicted by a potential military operation against Ukraine would be greater than any potential benefits. Certainly, the EU’s need to couple its economic and commercial soft power to hard power may well be the most important lesson to be learned from the current phase in the Ukrainian standoff. That lesson will render Brussels better qualified to weigh into the geopolitical arena more decisively, to cement transatlantic collaboration, and to defend the values of the West, while building a new security architecture with Russia in the longer term.

²¹ TASS website, ‘No Specific Date of Putin’s Visit to Turkey Announced Yet, Says Kremlin,’ available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1397191>, 3 February 2022.

²² George N. Tzogopoulos, ‘What Is Next For Russia and Greece?’ Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/what-is-next-for-russia-and-greece/>, 14 January 2022.

²³ EEAS website, ‘Europe in Danger: What Next for EU Security and Defence?’ Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/110084/%E2%80%9Ceuropa-danger-what-next-eu-security-and-defence%E2%80%9D-speech-high-representativevice-president_en, 25 January 2022.