

Checkmate in Ukraine

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Seen in retrospect, Russia's demand for a written response was a trap, one neither the U.S. nor NATO yet recognizes, writes Scott Ritter.

Contents

- [Crying 'Wolf'](#)
- [Setting a Trap](#)
- [Moves to Checkmate](#)

Back in December, Russia sent the U.S. and NATO two [draft](#) treaty [documents](#) spelling out its demands for security guarantees related to NATO's posture in Eastern Europe. These demands came in a climate of tension fueled by both a Russian military buildup bordering Ukraine, and U.S. and NATO hysteria over what they deemed an imminent Russian military incursion into Ukraine.

The written replies that arrived on Jan. 22 failed — as expected — to address any of Russia's concerns, including the red line of continued NATO expansion. Rather, the U.S. and NATO listed alternative pathways to diplomatic engagement, including arms control and limits on military exercises, and they now couch the ongoing crisis as a choice between accepting the diplomatic off-ramp they dictated, or war.

Russia, however, is far too sophisticated to allow itself to be boxed into such a corner. In the weeks and months ahead, Russia will be the one dictating the outcome of this crisis — which will be a resounding Russian victory.

The Russian buildup in its western and southern military districts, as well as in Belarus, has two purposes. The secondary goal is to demonstrate Russia's ability, at a time and place of its choosing, to project sufficient military power into Ukraine to overwhelmingly defeat the Ukrainian armed forces and bring down its government.

To be clear, Russia has threatened neither of these outcomes. It maintains that the military buildup is simply an exercise designed to ensure it can respond to NATO's aggressive expansion of forces along its western flank. It traces the confrontation to NATO's "original sin" of expansion.

Historical fact supports the Russian interpretation: The Russian mantra of "not one inch eastward" is derived from an [oral promise](#) made by former Secretary of State James Baker to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at the time of German reunification. But Russia's goal is not to score debating points, but rather to reverse NATO policy and posturing it deems harmful to its national security.

To this end, the primary purpose of Russia's military buildup is to expose the political, military and economic impotence of the U.S./NATO partnership by a range of crises — independent of any military incursion into Ukraine — for which the U.S. and NATO have no viable response other than to give in to most, if not all, of Russia's demands for security guarantees.



A map of the buffer zone established by the Minsk II protocol (12/02/2015). (Goran tek-en/Wikimedia)

Crying ‘Wolf’



Normandy format talks in Minsk (Feb. 11, 2015): Alexander Lukashenko, Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel, Francois Hollande, and Petro Poroshenko on a settlement to the situation in Ukraine. (Russian president’s office/Wikimedia)

The stage for the current crisis was set back in the spring of 2021, when Russia mobilized around 100,000 troops along the lines seen today. The U.S. and NATO immediately began a rhetoric-based war of perception management, using mainstream media and think tanks to paint a picture of Russian malfeasance and Western resolve.

A face-to-face meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden resulted, and Russia eventually drew down its forces — but not before making several salient points: It demanded that the West hold Ukraine’s feet to the fire regarding fulfillment of its obligations under the 2015 [Minsk agreement](#). And after a “freedom of navigation” exercise which brought a British destroyer into contested waters off Crimea, it declared red lines Russia was prepared to defend, with force if necessary.

Russia took away two lessons from this. First, that neither the U.S. nor NATO had a viable military response. Russian military superiority in any future conflict with Ukraine was all but assured. Second, that the only response either the U.S. or NATO could come up with would center on economic sanctions. This stress test exposed several critical weaknesses Russia could exploit.

Armed with these important insights, Russia waited until last fall to repeat the stress test, again mobilizing more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine and deploying tens of thousands of elite shock troops — the First Guards Tank Army — into Belarus. Again, Russia issued no threats, stating repeatedly that it was simply conducting routine military exercises.

The U.S. and NATO, in contrast, immediately cast the Russian buildup as proof positive of its intent to invade Ukraine. In drawing this conclusion — despite Russian denials and Ukraine’s rejection of the inevitability of such an outcome — both the U.S. and NATO effectively founded their position on the principle of the inviolability of NATO’s “open-door” policy, which says that any nation qualified for NATO membership should have the opportunity to join.

For its part, Russia noted that NATO’s eastward expansion has created an unacceptable national security risk. It claims a right to exert a sphere of influence around its borders, implying that any accession to NATO by the former Soviet Republics of Ukraine or Georgia is viewed as an existential threat that would require a “military-technical” response. Russia said as much in the two draft treaties it submitted in December. Furthermore, Russia demanded that both NATO and the U.S. respond in writing.

A map of buffer zone established by Minsk Protocol II (12/02/2015). (Goran tek-en/Wikimedia)

Setting a Trap

Seen in retrospect, Russia’s demand for a written response was a trap, one neither the U.S. nor NATO yet recognizes. By rejecting Russian demands for security guarantees, the U.S. and NATO have married themselves to a posture defined by the “open-door” policy on NATO membership. Moreover, when Russia refused to cease its mobilization in the face of [sanctions threats](#), the U.S. and NATO had no choice but to shift gears and create the perception of a military response designed to put pressure on Russia’s eastern flank — even though Washington has pointedly said it would not defend Ukraine from a Russian assault.

What emerged was, first, that neither the U.S. nor NATO is able to project meaningful military power even within NATO’s own borders. Putting 8,500 U.S. troops on alert for potential deployment to Europe is like bringing a garden hose to a three-alarm fire.

Moreover, threatening to activate NATO’s rapid response force for a non-NATO issue created fractures in the unity of NATO. Germany has been hesitant. The Czech Republic and Bulgaria have forbade their troops to be involved in any such adventure. Turkey views the entire Ukraine crisis as a U.S./NATO conspiracy to contain Turkish regional ambitions by tying it to a conflict with Russia.

These military fractures, in concert with Europe’s hesitation to commit economic suicide by going along with sanctions that would sever it from Russian energy it needs to survive, has provided Russia with three main takeaways: NATO is militarily impotent; no unanimity exists within either NATO or Europe on economic sanctions targeting Russia; and NATO — a consensus-based organization — is deeply fractured politically.

Moves to Checkmate

Despite the repeated Western warnings, Russia is highly unlikely to invade Ukraine — at least not yet. Instead, Russia appears to be entering a new phase of crisis management that seeks to exploit the weaknesses in the U.S./NATO alliance highlighted by their written responses to its demands.

First, Russia will keep the diplomatic option open, but on its terms. Moscow has already engaged in so-called Normandy Format talks involving Russia, France, Germany and Ukraine over the ongoing crisis in Donbas. In the initial meeting, all parties agreed to respect the cease-fire in effect and to

meet again in 10 days — the exact opposite of any imminent invasion by Russia. Note the absence of the U.S. and NATO from these talks.

Next, Russia will turn the threat of sanctions against the U.S. and Europe. Russia has already declared that banning it from the Swift system for international monetary transactions will result in the immediate halt of Russian energy supplies to Europe. Russia is expected to sign major economic agreements with China soon that will further insulate it from economic sanctions. China has made it clear it [supports Russia](#) in the current crisis, recognizing that if the West prevails against Russia, it will soon face a similar attack.

Finally, Russia will exploit U.S. hypocrisy on spheres of influence and military alliances by entering military relationships with Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua and deploying a naval squadron to the Caribbean, with the potential for additional force deployments in the future.

With these three measures, Russia seeks to further isolate the U.S. from NATO and Europe. In the end, the U.S. will be confronted with one of two options, either agree to trade NATO's open-door policy for Russian agreement not to deploy into the Western Hemisphere, or force a confrontation that will result in a Russian invasion of Ukraine that is seen by Europe as being the fault of the U.S..

The chess pieces are already being moved. While the U.S. may not see it, a Russian checkmate can be predicted sooner, rather than later.

[Energy Intelligence](#).

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P.S.

• Consortium News. January 30, 2022:
<https://consortiumnews.com/2022/01/30/checkmate-in-ukraine/>

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<https://www.energyintel.com/0000017e-a069-de39-a9ff-bbf980230000>

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