

Biden-Putin Meeting Is a Cliffhanger: Biden Dismisses Russia's Red Lines on Ukraine

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What has unfolded in the past 24 hours in the US-Russia diplomatic tango can be seen as a foreplay of the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden, which is [slated for Tuesday evening](#).

Russia has got what it has been keenly seeking — a meeting between Putin and Biden. Beyond that lies the “unknown unknown”.

In [remarks last Friday](#), top Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov had described the forthcoming meeting as a “follow-up” to the Putin-Biden talks at Geneva in June. But Ushakov ended up conveying that Ukraine tops the agenda and within it, NATO-related issues. Ushakov stressed that Putin intends to propose to Biden “the need to hold joint work with colleagues, with leading countries, on reaching corresponding legal accords that would rule out any further eastward expansion by NATO and the deployment of weapon systems that directly threaten us on the territory of states bordering on Russia, including Ukraine.”

Ushakov said Moscow urgently needs assurances that NATO would not expand in the eastward direction. To quote Ushakov,

“It (NATO expansion) is a very old issue. Both the the Soviet Union and Russia were given verbal assurances that NATO's military structures would not advance eastward. However, it urned out that those verbal assurances were worthless, although those statements were documented somehow, and there are records of the corresponding conversations.”

“Given the current tense situation, there is an urgent need for us to be provided with appropriate guarantees, as it cannot go on like this. It is hard to say what form this document will take, the main thing is that they must be written agreements,” he said.

Within hours, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hit back alleging that the Russian president is responsible for the current tensions, being “the decision maker in Russia”, and

underscored that there will be “very serious consequences” if Russia “decides to pursue a confrontation course” and Biden himself will “stand up resolutely against any reckless or aggressive actions that Russia may pursue.”

Soon afterward on Friday, President Biden stepped in to say “I don’t accept anyone’s red line,” in an indirect challenge to Moscow. He said, “We’re aware of Russia’s actions for a long time and my expectation is we’re going to have a long discussion with Putin.”

Biden added,

“What I am doing is putting together what I believe to be the most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr. Putin to go ahead and do what people are worried he’s going to do.” [read more](#)

Quite obviously, Biden is not about to agree to negotiate a security treaty with Russia over Ukraine or NATO expansion. Interestingly, the White House readout on Saturday mentions Biden as talking point but leaves out the NATO.

Unlike the brash megaphone diplomacy of his top diplomat, Biden himself has taken a more sophisticated approach hinting at some “most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives” to discuss with Putin. He hasn’t poured oil on the fire, but spoke like Don Vito Corleone in the Mario Puzo novel.

That said, the chances of a US-NATO rollback in Ukraine are virtually nil. The optics of a “retreat” will be simply too negative for Biden, post-Afghanistan. Besides, Ukraine’s transformation as an anti-Russian state is still unfinished business.

In the regime change project in Ukraine in 2013-2014, then vice-president Biden had a hands-on role. When Biden brought back Victoria Nuland into his administration in a key position in the state department he signalled his intention to follow through.

The Ukraine tensions have enabled the US to reassert its trans-Atlantic leadership. The NATO’s future is at stake here, too. The US and allies will ever give Russia a veto over Ukraine’s ambitions to one day join NATO and the EU.

On Wednesday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said after a meeting Wednesday of allied foreign ministers in Riga, “Only Ukraine and 30 NATO allies decide when Ukraine is ready to join NATO. Russia has no veto. Russia has no say. And Russia has no right to establish a sphere of influence, trying to control (its) neighbours.”

The point is, there is little Washington can offer to meet Russia’s demands without undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, which the US and its NATO allies have pledged to support in an “ironclad” commitment.

That said, some NATO Allies are privately sceptical about US warnings of an imminent Russian invasion. An internal analysis prepared for European Commission officials and diplomats, and seen by POLITICO, says, “Due to lack of logistical support, it would take one to two months for the Russian army to mobilise for a full-fledged invasion. (Moreover, its overall logistical weakness prevents the Russian army from serious invasion). Thus, there is no threat of imminent invasion.”

The analysis found “Moscow seems fully understanding [of] the costs of an invasion. So pre-positioning of (Russian troops) is more about delivering the message of discontent about the Western policy vis-vis Ukraine (increasing U.S./U.K. and NATO presence).”

Indeed, Putin’s predicament is no less acute. Putin doesn’t want to start another war in Ukraine but Moscow also cannot accept the increasing US, UK and NATO military ties with Ukraine, as well as Ukraine’s acquisition of new weaponry.

While NATO has no permanent troop presence in Ukraine, the allied nations have built up close mil-to-mil links with Ukrainian forces.

This is where the risk lies. If Russia’s legitimate security concerns over the growing Western military presence in Ukraine and that country’s steady transformation as an anti-Russian state with tacit Western encouragement are not addressed, Russia will have no option but to resort to coercive diplomacy.

As [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov](#) put it, further NATO expansion will “unambiguously affect the fundamental interests of our security.” Biden cannot afford to underestimate Russia’s bottom line.

How Biden goes about squaring the circle at Tuesday’s meeting remains to be seen. To be sure, Russia gets the best chance ever today in the post-Cold War era to force the US to the negotiating table on the core issue of its discontent with the West — NATO expansion.

But on his part, Biden also cannot afford to look “weak” at a juncture when his performance and competence no longer instil confidence among the American voters.

Ukraine and Russia per se do not agitate the voter, but in the political environment that Biden and the Democratic Party navigate, negativity and tribalism are what is driving American politics today. A confrontation with Russia could add to the grist of the mill alongside issues of price hikes and shortages, pandemic, education, culture war, Afghanistan and so on.

Russia also happened to be an energy superpower and given Europe’s heavy dependence on Russian energy supplies and the instability in the world oil market, isolating Russia is easier said than done.

Above all, Biden cannot afford to get entangled with Russia and take eyes off China. Make no mistake, China is closely watching how Biden is cutting the Gordian knot on Tuesday. It has implications for China’s “peaceful reunification” with Taiwan.

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