

Moscow's Coercive Diplomacy Is Working

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The upshot of the [Russian response](#), transmitted to Washington on Thursday, regarding security guarantees may look as if the stalemate is heading toward a war. Moscow has rejected the US' call for 'de-escalation' by pointing out that the Russian troops are deployed on Russian territories; it also rejects the threat of sanctions, which it says is a contrived attempt to “exert pressure and devalue Russia's proposals on security guarantees.”

Second, Russia is concerned over “the growing military activity of the United States and NATO directly near Russian borders, while our ‘red lines’ and core security interests, as well as Russia's sovereign right to protect them, are still being ignored”.

Third, Russia believes that in order to de-escalate the situation around Ukraine, “it is fundamentally important” to implement an array of steps, including the halt of arms supplies to Ukraine, the recall of all Western advisers and instructors from that country as well as cessation of NATO countries' joint exercises with the Ukrainian armed forces.

Finally, Russia reiterated that its demands for legally bound guarantees (stopping NATO's expansion, refusing to use strike weapons systems near Russian borders, and returning the bloc's military infrastructure in Europe to its status in 1997) are being ignored.

However, the [latest word from Moscow](#) is that negotiations will continue on European security issues although Moscow's core demands have not been met. A meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is being scheduled for next week at a European venue.

This is a pragmatic decision. For Moscow, the secondary issues relating to issues of military security, arms control and strategic stability look generally solvable and could even be put together as an agreement. After all, these issues were originally Russian proposals, which Washington had previously ignored and is now willing to discuss.

For the US too, this is a realistic approach, since, after all, the development of hypersonic missiles by Russia has changed the strategic balance in the latter's favour and there is no

point deploying intermediate nuclear forces in Europe in the changed circumstances!

On the other hand, both superpowers sense the importance of good optics which can only create some gravitas for the political track in the near term that may [help address the core issues](#).

Does it mean that the crisis has peaked? The point to be noted here is that the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine was never really there. However, below that threshold, a Russian intervention in Donbass region is a one hundred percent certainty [if the Ukrainian forces launch an attack](#) against the separatist forces.

The catch is, if Russian intervention takes place, all bets are off, because an entirely different dynamics might appear. Conceivably, Moscow will act with a scenario in mind to ensure that pending a durable settlement in Ukraine, the security of the millions of ethnic Russians (many holding Russian passports) will never again be in jeopardy, or held hostage by the right-wing neo-Nazi Ukrainian nationalist forces mentored by the Western intelligence who dominate Kiev.

Therefore, a Russian offensive westward upto the Dnepr River may become necessary to create a buffer zone. In fact, an evacuation of the elderly, women and children from Donbass to the Rostov region in southern Russia began today. The Kremlin has been [ringing alarm bells](#) in the past 48 hours that the possibility of an attack on Donbass is “quite real.”

It is from such a perspective that the [Duma's recommendation](#) to President Putin to recognise the two breakaway “people’s republics” in Donbass needs to be viewed. Putin has said he doesn’t intend to act on it now. In reality, it gives underpinning for a Plan B in case conflict erupts in Donbass, or if the US gameplan is to bog down Russia in protracted negotiations, or if Washington remains obdurate vis-a-vis Moscow’s demands for security guarantee.

Washington has conceded some ground, though. Apart from showing readiness to discuss the issues of European security, the US has withdrawn its military advisors and trainers from Ukraine, Biden has committed that US will not militarily intervene in Ukraine even if it is attacked or faces defeat and surrender, and that US will not deploy missiles.

Russia’s coercive diplomacy seems to be working! Time is on its side because this is about national security and national defence, no matter what efforts that entails or how long they must continue. Contrary to western propaganda, Russian public trusts Putin’s judgment and leadership. There’s no dent in his public rating.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, setting aside the usual bluster in the American propaganda, the political reality is that according to the latest CBS poll, 53% of Americans think US shouldn’t take sides in a conflict and 33% think Ukraine is simply not America’s business. And even American analysts concede that Russian economy has the [capacity and resilience to withstand US sanctions](#).

Therefore, we may expect, as the noted Russian security analyst Fyodor Lukyanov told Kommersant paper today, “the next phase of the game of nerves may be a diplomatic one... On the whole, another phase of manageable tensions is to be expected.” But even here, the advantage lies with Russia.

For a start, China has given robust support to Russia and on Wednesday, called on Washington to “accommodate Russia’s legitimate and reasonable concerns over security and play a constructive role for all parties to seek a political settlement to Ukraine issue on the basis of Minsk-2 agreement, rather than hype up and sensationalise and escalate tensions.”

On the contrary, despite Washington’s tall claims that the US and European allies are moving in “lockstep” (to borrow Biden’s expression) and the 24×7 efforts by US officials to take the allies along, the picture that emerges is that the fault lines that have been there in the recent years in the western alliance system are surging and cracks are appearing due to the immense strategic burden of a confrontation with Russia, the spectre of a war in Europe and a massive refugee flow that will ensue, and all the attendant uncertainties for Europe’s post-pandemic economic recovery.

The stance of France and Germany, the two most important European players, must be causing anxiety in Washington. Both President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Moscow and held lengthy talks with Putin. Macron also showed his discontent over the US’ overlordship by telephoning Chinese President Xi Jinping on February 16.

Macron showered fulsome praise for the “splendid and successful opening ceremony” of the Olympic Winter Games and conveyed France’s full support for China’s “effort to make a success of the Olympic”!

Xi in turn complimented Macron that “since assuming the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) this year, France has done a lot to enhance EU solidarity and strengthen Europe’s strategic autonomy.”

Macron went on to pledge that “France will make all-out efforts to advance the positive agenda between the EU and China, and work together with China to ensure the success of the EU-China Leaders’ Meeting and push forward the development of EU-China relations.” The two leaders reached [consensus over a six-point agenda](#) for bilateral cooperation for the next stage.

Macron also took the initiative to schedule an [EU-China summit meeting on April 1](#) against the backdrop of China’s deepening ties with Russia and amidst the war hysteria in the US over a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Reports have appeared that due to opposition from some European countries, Washington has had to drop from the sanctions package the s-called “nuclear option” — Russia’s exclusion from SWIFT payment mechanism, effectively cutting it off from the international banking system.

All these undercurrents in play put pressure on the Biden administration. While in Moscow, Scholz who had met Biden in Washington before that, affirmed publicly in the presence of Putin that so long as they remained in power in Berlin and Moscow, for all practical purposes, there is no question of the NATO admitting Ukraine as a member.

Put differently, so long as Russia regards Ukraine’s NATO membership as a casus belli, the alliance will not move in that direction. That is to say, unless Moscow changes its mind, there’s no NATO membership for Ukraine (or Georgia.) We could be hearing the crunchy sound of ice cracking on the frozen lake.

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