

Research Briefing

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By Claire Mills

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European security: the outcome of talks with Russia

In mid-January 2022 the US, NATO, the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Russia held a series of talks on the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and European security more broadly.

Although prompted by diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine, where 100,000 Russian troops have amassed at the border, the main focus of talks was primarily on the relationship between Russia and the US/NATO and Russia's demands for legally binding security guarantees within Europe and its near abroad.

No breakthroughs were achieved. The US and NATO offered further dialogue on several areas of potential cooperation but would not concede to Russian demands to limit its presence in eastern Europe and limit NATO enlargement, which Russia has described as a red line for its national security.

Russia was non-committal on the prospect of future security talks or on de-escalating tensions on the Ukrainian border. Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov has said the Kremlin is awaiting written counterproposals from the US and NATO, which will inform Moscow's decision making. All eyes are now on President Putin and the Kremlin's next steps.

1

Russian proposals to change the European security order

President Putin has been very clear that Moscow views Ukraine's deepening relationship with NATO with concern, calling it a "creeping threat" to Russia's national security.¹

Speaking at an investment forum on 30 November 2021, President Putin specifically referenced the deployment of any offensive strike capabilities within Ukraine, or Ukraine's membership of NATO as "red lines" for Russia.² He subsequently called for the conclusion of legally binding security guarantees that would address Ukraine's relationship with NATO but also the issue of NATO's presence in the Eastern European countries on Russia's borders.³

NATO's enlargement into former Soviet and [Warsaw Pact](#)⁴ countries since 1999 has been a constant point of tension at the heart of the NATO-Russia relationship.⁵

President Putin has long considered that after the collapse of the Soviet Union promises were made to Russia that NATO would not expand eastwards. However, what was promised to Russia in the mid-1990s is hotly contested. Many Western analysts consider that no such promises were made; while others have suggested that verbal assurances were given during diplomatic talks. What is certain is that written guarantees did not form part of any legally binding agreement, including the [NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997](#).⁶

President Putin raised his arguments again in his annual news conference on 23 December 2021:

We remember, as I have mentioned many times before and as you know very well, how you promised us in the 1990s that [NATO] would not move an inch to the East. You cheated us shamelessly: there have been five waves of NATO

¹ ["What are the 10 key areas of tension between the US and Russia?"](#), Al Jazeera, 6 December 2021 (accessed on 10 December 2021)

² President of Russia, [Russia Calling Investment Forum](#), 30 November 2021

³ President of Russia, [Meeting with US President Joseph Biden](#), 7 December 2021

⁴ The Warsaw Pact was a collective defence treaty between the Soviet Union and seven Soviet satellite states in central and eastern Europe.

⁵ In 1997 former Warsaw Pact countries, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, were invited to begin accession talks. Those countries subsequently joined NATO in March 1999. The Alliance expanded again in 2004 when former Soviet states Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and former Warsaw Pact countries Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia joined. Albania, a former member of the Warsaw Pact until 1968, joined in 2009.

⁶ See for example John Lough in [Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia](#), May 2021; Radio Free Europe, ["Did the West promise Moscow that NATO would not expand? Well, it's complicated"](#), 19 May 2021 and The Guardian, ["Russia's belief in NATO's 'betrayal' and why it matters today"](#), 12 January 2022

expansion, and now the weapons systems I mentioned have been deployed in Romania and deployment has recently begun in Poland. This is what we are talking about, can you not see?

We are not threatening anyone. Have we approached US borders? Or the borders of Britain or any other country? It is you who have come to our border, and now you say that Ukraine will become a member of NATO as well. Or, even if it does not join NATO, that military bases and strike systems will be placed on its territory under bilateral agreements. This is the point.

And you are demanding guarantees from me. It is you who must give us guarantees, and you must do it immediately, right now, instead of talking about it for decades and doing what you want, while talking quietly about the need for security guarantees to everyone. This is the point.⁷

In December 2021 the Kremlin presented its proposals in the form of a [draft treaty to the United States on security guarantees](#), and an [agreement on measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation and Member States of NATO](#).

At the heart of Russia's new proposals on security guarantees are three fundamental premises:

1. That NATO will not expand any further eastward, including accepting Ukraine as a Member State.
2. That US/ NATO will cease bilateral military cooperation, including the basing of military infrastructure, in countries of the former Soviet Union that are not already members of NATO.
3. All parties will not deploy military forces or conduct exercises in areas where such deployments could be perceived as a threat to the other parties' national security. From the perspective of Russia, this includes the eastern European member states of NATO.

In an interview on 31 December 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explained Russia's rationale behind the proposals:

This is a package of documents designed to guarantee that any further NATO advance to the East and the deployment of weapons systems near Russian borders that threaten us, especially in Ukraine, is ruled out [...]

Our proposals are designed to create and legally implement a new system of agreements based on the principle of indivisible security and abandoning any attempt at achieving military superiority, which was approved unanimously by the leaders of all Euro-Atlantic states in the 1990s. Let me emphasise that what we need is legally binding guarantees since our Western colleagues have systematically failed to fulfill their political obligations, not to mention their verbal assurances and promises to the Soviet and Russian leadership.

⁷ President of Russia, [Vladimir Putin's annual news conference](#), 23 December 2021

This legal foundation can be used to reach other agreements on a variety of issues in the future, including conventional arms control.⁸

According to the Russian news agency TASS, President Putin said the draft security agreements were not “an ultimatum” to the West, despite their portrayal in Western media.⁹

2 Promise of talks

In efforts to defuse the crisis on the borders of Ukraine, in December 2021 the US and NATO offered to convene talks with Russia to discuss Ukraine but also wider security concerns, on both sides. Russian proposals for legally binding security guarantees would be addressed during those talks, although the US and NATO made it clear that discussions must proceed on the basis of reciprocity.¹⁰

A series of meetings between the US, NATO, OSCE and Russia were scheduled for 10-13 January 2022.

Whilst welcoming the talks, all sides expressed reservations about what they may achieve.

US reservations

US State Department spokesman, Ned Price, acknowledged that “the Russians know full well there are some things in those proposals that will be unacceptable to the United States and to our European allies and partners” but said the purpose of the talks was to “determine where there may be some potential for dialogue and discussion and some areas that merit that discussion... together with our allies and partners”.¹¹ In a conversation with President Putin at the end of December 2021, President Biden reiterated that substantive progress could only be achieved in “an environment of de-escalation rather than escalation”.¹²

⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Rossiya Segodnya](#), 31 December 2021

⁹ TASS, [“Draft security guarantee agreements offered by Russia are not ultimatum, Putin says”](#), 21 December 2021

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ [US Department of State press briefing](#), 28 December 2021

¹² White House, [Statement by Press Secretary Jen Psaki on President Biden’s phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia](#), 30 December 2021

Russia warns against “endless” discussions

In an interview with Rossiya Segodnya on 31 December 2021, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, indicated Russia’s desire for prompt action, warning that Russia “will not allow anyone to drag out our initiatives in endless discussions”. He warned that “if a constructive response does not follow within a reasonable time and the West continues its aggressive course, Russia will be forced to take every necessary action to ensure a strategic balance and to eliminate unacceptable threats to our security”.¹³

President Putin said that “it is not the negotiations themselves but the results that matter to us”.¹⁴

NATO warns against raising expectations

The NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, warned against raising expectations, viewing the talks as the start of a diplomatic process: “What we are hoping for is that we can agree on a way forward. That we can agree on a series of meetings. That we can agree on the process”.¹⁵

3 What was the outcome of talks?

3.1 US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue

Bilateral talks were held between the US and Russia in an extraordinary meeting of the Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) on 10 January 2022.¹⁶

At the outset, the US administration was clear that nothing relating to European security would be discussed without the involvement of European allies.¹⁷ In a press briefing following the meeting, US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, said:

The United States came to today’s extraordinary meeting prepared to hear Russia’s security concerns and to share our own. We came as well with a

¹³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Rossiya Segodnya](#), 31 December 2021

¹⁴ President of Russia, [Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference](#), 23 December 2021

¹⁵ NATO, [Joint Press Point](#), 10 January 2022

¹⁶ The Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) was [re-established by the US and Russia in 2021](#), primarily as a forum to discuss nuclear arms control and risk reduction. The [last round of strategic stability talks](#) was held in September 2021.

¹⁷ US State Department, [Press briefing](#), 4 January 2022

number of ideas where our two countries could take reciprocal actions that would be in our security interests and improve strategic stability. The United States offered to meet again soon to discuss these bilateral issues in more detail.¹⁸

Preliminary ideas

Among preliminary ideas for reciprocal action were:

- Discussion of the future of certain missile systems in Europe, along the lines of the former [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#).
- Reciprocal limits on the size and scope of military exercises.
- Increased transparency of military exercises, by both sides.
- Options for arms control, including both strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons.

The US reiterated, however, that Russian demands for a halt to NATO expansion and future bilateral cooperation with former Soviet countries, were “non-starters” for the administration.

In her concluding remarks Ms Sherman stated:

We have been clear, and we were clear today, that the United States would welcome genuine progress through diplomacy. We also reiterated that we believe genuine progress can only take place in a climate of de-escalation, not escalation. If Russia stays at the table and takes concrete steps to de-escalate tensions, we believe we can achieve progress. But if Russia walks away from the diplomatic path, it may well be quite apparent that they were never serious about pursuing diplomacy at all.¹⁹

Russian response

At the meeting, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, dismissed concerns that Russia intended to invade Ukraine, reiterating that military forces were deployed on military exercises on Russian territory and that there was “no reason to fear any escalation scenario in this regard”.²⁰

On wider security guarantees, Russian officials outlined the main tenets of their draft proposals saying: “For us it’s absolutely mandatory to make sure that Ukraine never, never, ever becomes a member of NATO,” and that Russia needs “iron-clad, waterproof, bulletproof, legally binding guarantees. Not assurances, not safeguards, guarantees with all the words 'shall, must', everything that should be put in, 'never ever becoming a member of NATO’”.²¹

¹⁸ US State Department, [Briefing with Deputy Secretary Wendy R. Sherman on the US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue](#), 10 January 2022

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Euractiv, [“US, Russia make no breakthrough or concessions in security talks, commit to keep talking”](#), 11 January 2022

²¹ Reuters, [“US and Russia still far apart after Geneva talks”](#), 11 January 2022

Immediately after the meeting Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov noted that the US “took Russian proposals very seriously” and indicated that Russia would welcome the continuation of dialogue.²²

3.2 NATO-Russia Council

The NATO-Russia Council met on 12 January 2022, for the first time in over two years.²³

Russia raised its proposals for security guarantees with the US and NATO, including its demand that no new members will be admitted to NATO and that NATO forces would withdraw from its Eastern European member states that joined the Alliance after 1997 and the signing of the [NATO-Russia Founding Act](#). It did not commit to de-escalation at the Ukrainian border.

Responding to those proposals, NATO allies “reaffirmed NATO’s open-door policy and the right of each nation to choose its own security arrangements”. They also made clear that they will not “renounce their ability to protect and defend each other”, including with the presence of NATO troops in eastern Europe.²⁴

NATO’s aim for future talks

Despite the talks ending with no resolution, the NATO Secretary General confirmed that allies “are ready to meet again with Russia to have discussions in greater detail, to put concrete proposals on the table, and to seek constructive outcomes”. Issues that NATO would like to address in future talks, include:

- Ways to increase the transparency of military exercises
- Ways to prevent dangerous military incidents
- Measures to reduce space and cyber threats.
- Arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, including reciprocal limits on missile deployments and to address nuclear policies.
- The improvement of civil and military communication channels and the possibility of re-establishing respective liaison offices in Moscow and Brussels.²⁵

The NATO Secretary General confirmed that, while the alliance will not compromise on core principles, allies “will make every effort to find a political

²² Euronews, “[Security talks with US difficult, but concrete says Russian Deputy MFA Ryabkov](#)”, 11 January 2022

²³ The NRC [last met in July 2019](#) to discuss Ukraine and the then potential [collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#).

²⁴ NATO, [Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council](#), 12 January 2022

²⁵ NATO, [Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council](#), 12 January 2022

way forward” and that “these are opportunities for constructive engagement... should not be missed, in the interest of security in Europe”.²⁶

Russian response

Russia did not commit to future talks, although officials did not outrightly reject them either, indicating that they would need time before coming back to NATO with an answer.²⁷

Russia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Grushko, who led the Russian delegation, stated that talks had been “frank and heart to heart” but that they had also revealed a “large number of disagreements on fundamental issues”²⁸ and that NATO had “no positive agenda – none at all”.²⁹ Mr Grushko also indicated that the Kremlin was expecting written counter proposals to the Russian agreements presented in December 2021, suggesting that the talks in Brussels had given “the impression that such a document may emerge”.³⁰

That expectation was reiterated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in an interview with Russian television station Channel One, on 13 January 2022:

We hope that the recent promises made in Geneva and Brussels will be kept. The United States and NATO promised to put their proposals down on paper. We have repeatedly made it clear to them that we need to have an article-by-article response to our documents. Should they have an issue with any provision, they should clarify why and set it down on paper. If they find a particular provision suitable with one exception, they should put this exception in writing as well. If they want to exclude or add something, they should do so in writing as well. We provided our thoughts in writing a month ago. Washington and Brussels had enough time to do as requested. Both of them promised to respond in writing.³¹

He went on to state:

I believe we will receive it within a week. Following that Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu and I will report to Russian President Vladimir Putin because we are acting on his direct instructions – this was his initiative. Next, we will think how to respond to what our Western partners might come up with, meaning their counterproposals.³²

²⁶ NATO, [Press conference following the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council](#), 12 January 2022

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ The Times, “NATO vows to send troops if Russia invades Ukraine”, 12 January 2022

²⁹ The Moscow Times, “[NATO-Russia Council – what was discussed?](#)”, 13 January 2022

³⁰ Russia Today, “[Key takeaways from Moscow’s views of NATO-Russia negotiations](#)”, 13 January 2022. The full press briefing of Alexander Grushko, in Russian, is available via the [Russian Embassy in the UK’s twitter account](#).

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Channel One](#), 13 January 2022

³² ibid

He concluded by saying “We will continue waiting but not for a long time [...] the reality is that we have been promised a written response. We will wait for it and then determine what to do next”.³³

Foreign Minister Lavrov’s comments appear at odds with the views expressed by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in an interview with Russian broadcaster RVTI on 13 January. He suggested that the US and NATO’s unwillingness to meet Russia’s “key demands for security”, meant that the talks were “at a dead end” and there was no reason for future rounds of discussion.³⁴

UK and US response

Speaking immediately after the NATO-Russia talks, the UK Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, commented:

What happens next will be absolutely critical to peace and security in Europe. The only way forward is for Russia to de-escalate and engage in meaningful discussions.³⁵

US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman also said “We expect and had expected that the Russian delegations at the SSD here at the NATO-Russia Council and tomorrow at the OSCE will have to report back to President Putin, who we all hope will choose peace and security”. However, she also noted that “If Russia walks away... it will be quite apparent they were never serious about pursuing diplomacy at all”.³⁶

3.3

OSCE Permanent Council

The [OSCE Helsinki Act 1975](#), to which both Russia and Ukraine are party, sets out several fundamental principles of security: the inviolability of internationally recognised borders and the right of sovereign countries to determine with whom they associate. The OSCE is a member of the Trilateral Contact Group for Ukraine which works towards implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

The OSCE Permanent Council met on 13 January 2022 in a pre-planned session and irrespective of the situation in Ukraine.³⁷ At the meeting Polish Foreign Minister, Zbigniew Rau, was officially inaugurated as the OSCE Chairman and

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ “Russia writes off security talks as diplomatic dead end”, *The Financial Times*, 14 January 2022

³⁵ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [NATO-Russia Council: Foreign Secretary’s statement](#), 12 January 2022

³⁶ US State Department, [Deputy Secretary Wendy R. Sherman at a press availability](#), 12 January 2022

³⁷ The [OSCE Permanent Council](#) is the principal decision-making body for regular political consultations and for governing the day-to-day operational work of the OSCE between the meetings of the Ministerial Council. It meets on a regular basis.

he set out Poland's priorities for the coming year. Ukraine was also on the agenda.

In his address to the Permanent Council the Chairman called for the debate on European security to be "reinvigorated" and the start of a process that "will help us to uphold the Helsinki principles in full conformity with international law".³⁸ No specific measures were proposed.

The US welcomed the Chair's proposals "to use the OSCE as a venue for a revitalized discussion on European Security", citing "Russia's unprovoked actions towards Ukraine as an immediate and urgent challenge to peace and security in the OSCE region". More specifically, the US Ambassador to the OSCE, Michael Carpenter, highlighted:

We believe that the OSCE is the most inclusive venue for discussion of concerns about conventional military forces and of enhancing military transparency, deconfliction, and confidence building. We also need to focus on adherence to OSCE principles that advance conflict prevention and resolution. This is also the right venue to discuss the non-military aspects of security, including the indivisible link between respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals within states and achieving peace, prosperity, and cooperation among states. These three broad topics are ripe for a robust discussion and for creative proposals that would enhance the security of all states sitting around this table.³⁹

The Head of the UK delegation to the OSCE, Neil Bush, said:

We support your approach for the OSCE to be used as a platform for discussions on European security. It is an appropriate and inclusive platform. We must defend the principle that there should be no discussions about security without the countries concerned being present [...]

We believe that we should move forward in a timely fashion in reinvigorating the debate on European security and will be happy to feed in thoughts.⁴⁰

Russian Representative to the OSCE, Alexander Lukashevich, reportedly called the talks "a disappointment" and that he had expected more substantial and in-depth discussions.⁴¹

However, in his 13 January interview with Channel One, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, dismissed discussions within the OSCE stating that Russia had not "initiated talks in the OSCE" and that while the Russian

³⁸ OSCE Chairmanship, [Press release](#), 13 January 2022

³⁹ US Embassy and Consulate in Poland, [Response to the opening address of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office](#), 13 January 2022

⁴⁰ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [OSCE Chair in Office: UK response statement](#), 13 January 2022

⁴¹ The full press briefing, in Russian, is available via [YouTube](#). At the time of writing an English transcript was not yet available on the [Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE](#).

representative to the OSCE would mention “the [security] initiatives we are discussing now... the main format is Russia-US and Russia-NATO”.⁴²

4 What happens next?

Russia has indicated that it expects the US and NATO to submit written counter proposals to its draft security agreements, which it will then consider and decide on next steps, including whether to engage in future rounds of security talks. The Kremlin has not indicated any timetable for future decision making or any intention to de-escalate in Ukraine. At a press briefing on 14 January Sergey Lavrov confirmed: “We are waiting for our colleagues to provide their answers in writing, just as we did with our proposals. We will continue working to prepare for any eventuality”.⁴³

The US and NATO have, however, expressed the belief that the onus is now on Russia to de-escalate and engage in meaningful diplomacy. At a White House press briefing on 13 January, US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, said the administration would now “consult with allies and partners on how to proceed” and that the US was “prepared to continue with diplomacy to advance security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic” but that it was “equally prepared if Russia chooses a different path”.⁴⁴

Potential “false flag” as pretext for Russian invasion

All eyes are now on Russia and the likely actions of President Putin. At a press briefing on 14 January, less than a day after talks at the OSCE concluded, the US Department of Defense revealed that there had been “credible reports” that Russia was working towards creating a pretext for an invasion of Ukraine by preparing for “false flag operations”, undertaken by Russian operatives and intended to look like an attack on those forces supported by Russia, or the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine.⁴⁵ Russia has dismissed the allegations, calling them “unfounded”.⁴⁶

Possible cyber-attack on Ukraine

Ukraine has also blamed Russia for a mass cyberattack on Ukrainian government institutions on 14 January, although Western nations have

⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Channel One](#), 13 January 2022

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [News conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2021](#), 14 January 2022

⁴⁴ White House, [Press briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan](#), 13 January 2022

⁴⁵ US Department of Defense, [Press briefing](#), 14 January 2022.

⁴⁶ The Moscow Times, [“US says Russia readying ‘false-flag’ operation to invade Ukraine”](#), 14 January 2022

stopped short of doing the same. In a statement the NATO Secretary General condemned the attacks, without attributing blame, and indicated that NATO would provide additional cyber support to Ukraine.⁴⁷ Russia has again denied the allegations.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ NATO, [Statement by the NATO Secretary General on cyber attacks against Ukraine](#), 14 January 2022

⁴⁸ The Guardian, [“Ukraine says evidence points to Russia being behind cyber attack”](#), 16 January 2022

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