

Russia's Showdown over NATO Has Been a Long Time in the Making

Aris, Ben

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Aris, B. (2022). Russia's Showdown over NATO Has Been a Long Time in the Making. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 276, 3-5. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000533116>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Finally, the current crisis demonstrates how much importance Russia really (not declaratively) attaches to the different dimensions outlined in its foreign policy. In official declarations, the Russian leadership states that the post-Soviet space is an unconditional priority for Russian foreign policy. The current crisis shows, however, that it is not like this at all. By building up its military on the border to Ukraine, President Putin in fact sends the West a signal that he would like to see the fate of Ukraine discussed directly between Washington and Moscow, in a so called “Yalta 2.0”.

From this perspective, the current escalation is a part of Russia’s great power repertoire, based on the idea that major powers get together and decide the fate of smaller nations in Europe and elsewhere. However, Russia’s great power agenda is inconsistent with its regional agenda—the aim of playing the role of a regional leader for its post-Soviet neighbors. The attempts to build up the image of Russia as a “great power” provokes a reduc-

tion of its actual influence in the post-Soviet region. The more Russia acts as a “great power”, the less credible are Putin’s promises to respect the national sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. In other words, Putin’s global ambitions principally hinder the integration of the post-Soviet space and significantly limits its scope. To put it simply: if Russia deliberately peddles its great power agenda, it gives up its ambitions to dominate and control in the post-Soviet space, because it will be impossible to reconcile these two agendas in a consistent manner.

Russian foreign policy is internally inconsistent, whether in its domestic purposes, its neighborhood, or in relation to the West. The crucial question that remains open is: Will such a foreign policy pay off for Russia? Based on the insights gained over the last few months, Russia’s foreign policies efforts seem to be misaligned with its aims to act as both a great power and the leader in the post-Soviet space.

About the Author

Irina Busygina is Professor at the Department of Politics and International Relations at Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg, and Director of the Center for Comparative Governance Studies. Her research interests include Russian Politics, Russian Foreign Policy, Post-Soviet Space, Russia–EU Relations.

Recent Publications

- Irina Busygina. 2021. Russia and Its Two “Shared Neighborhoods”, *PONARS Policy Memo* N 712, October.
- Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov. 2021. Trade-offs and inconsistencies of the Russian foreign policy: The case of Eurasia, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, First Published March 10, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366521998241>.
- Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov. 2020. Russia, Post-Soviet Integration, and the EAEU: The Balance between Domination and Cooperation, *Problems of Post-Communism*. Published online September 01. DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2020.1803755](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1803755).
- Irina Busygina. 2018. *Russia-EU Relations and the Common Neighborhood: Coercion Versus Authority*. UK: Routledge.

COMMENTARY

Russia’s Showdown over NATO Has Been a Long Time in the Making

By Ben Aris (BNE, Berlin)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000533116

The talk is of war and an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, but this prospect hasn’t come out of the blue. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been complaining about NATO’s expansion for more than a decade, which he says threatens Russia’s security.

From the Kremlin’s point of view, Russia has been excluded from the current European security arrangements, which de facto defines it as “the enemy”. Indeed,

amongst the eight point list of demands that the Russian Foreign Ministry sent the west in December was one asking for an acknowledgement that “we are not enemies”, as well as the better known “no more NATO expansion eastwards and especially not for Ukraine” demand.

Some have argued that Putin has turned his guns on Ukraine as he abhors a democracy and sees a flourishing

Ukraine as a threat, but this idea holds little water as Russia maintains good relationships with many democracies, including Armenia with which it has a military alliance; they are both members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

The roots of the current crisis run much deeper than that, and began with the verbal promises made to Mikhail Gorbachev in a key meeting with US Secretary of State James Baker on February 9, 1990, in which Baker promised that NATO would expand “not one inch” to the east. The nature of these promises have remained controversial ever since. However, these promises are now a matter of historical record, after dozens of embassy, government and other documents were declassified and are now freely available on the internet. Those verbal promises were repeated by multiple western leaders at the time, although nothing was ever put on paper.

Putin has brought up the issue of Baker’s promises many times. In his famous Munich Security Conference address in 2007, Putin made his unhappiness with NATO’s expansion explicit. He specifically referred to a speech given by then NATO General Secretary Manfred Woerner, who said: “The fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee.”

Those promises have no legal standing, but it is clear that Putin intends to hold NATO to those commitments, by using the threat of force if necessary. And, he wants to get such a commitment recorded on paper, hence the Kremlin’s repeated insistence on “legally binding guarantees.”

During his first term in office, starting in 2000, Putin made several attempts to move politically closer to Europe and remake the post-Cold War security arrangements. His first foreign trip was to London to meet Tony Blair, a visit in which he signed off on a 50:50 joint venture between Russian oil major TNK and the British oil major BP on very favourable terms.

He also asked to join both the EU and NATO, but was rebuffed on both occasions. NATO told him that Russia could apply, but Putin replied that Russia “would not queue up with a lot of other unimportant countries” to join the alliance and the idea was dropped.

Relations worsened significantly after the US unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2002, one of the pillars of Europe’s Cold War security infrastructure. Washington also later ditched the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the OSCE Open Skies Treaty that allows overflights of other signatories territory to monitor arms distributions. This process was only brought to an end in the first week of US president Joe Biden’s term in office when he renewed the START III nuclear missile treaty

and Biden made it clear that he wanted to restart arms control talks.

Putin’s 2007 Munich speech is widely taken as the turning point, with Putin warning that if NATO expansion did not stop then Russia would start to push back.

As relations continued to deteriorate Putin bit the bullet in 2012 and started a crash course military modernisation in 2012. It was a dramatic decision as it sacrificed the relative prosperity that Russia had enjoyed during the boom years of the noughties. The former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, who had overseen this economic revival, objected to the re-tasking of the budget and was very publically sacked. The real income growth that Russian citizens had enjoyed for almost a decade evaporated and the economy began to stagnate as GDP growth fell to zero in 2013 despite oil prices remaining at \$100.

Relations with European states fell to an all-time low in 2014 when Putin annexed Crimea. The Euro-aidan revolution of dignity saw a pro-Western government installed in Ukraine that aspired to join the EU, although little mention of NATO membership was made at that time. Putin calculated that Ukraine was drifting out of Russia’s orbit and that US contractors had already offered to upgrade the ports on the peninsula, so Putin cut his losses and took Crimea to secure control over the key Russian naval base in Sevastopol once and for all.

The decision was also part of a wider naval strategy that has seen Russia re-establish itself as a naval force in the Mediterranean after an absence of almost two decades.

With all these pieces in place, Putin was ready to finally demand, and force if necessary, a new pan-European security deal on the West.

The diplomatic drive to this end kicked off in February 2020 during a disastrous visit to Moscow by the European Union’s top diplomat Josep Borrell, during which Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov delivered a new rules of the game speech that set the bar at zero: Russia would no longer tolerate the dual policy of doing business with one hand and imposing sanctions with the other. Lavrov later threatened to break off diplomatic relations with the EU entirely and Moscow did break off diplomatic relations with NATO that October.

Putin appears to have been preparing for the current showdown for at least a decade. The dispute is about more than just Russia’s control or influence on Ukraine, it is about a complete remake of Europe’s security infrastructure and Putin has already made huge sacrifices to put himself in a position to withstand any measures the West can throw at Russia.

Despite Russia Inc being in healthy profit, the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) has built up reserves of over

\$630bn—17 months of import cover, although three is generally considered sufficient. It has paid down its debt and has the lowest debt in the world among major economies. And the government has been in effect running austerity budgets since 2012.

The resulting Fiscal Fortress makes Russia largely impervious to sanctions, but it has also held the economy's potential growth to 2%, far below its potential say economists. If the tensions with the West disappeared and the cash pile was spent or if the government and businesses were allowed to leverage up, then the econ-

omy would boom. But that won't happen unless Putin can win a new security deal that he is confident will fulfil Russia's security needs.

If not, then Putin's annexation of Crimea shows that he is willing to make considerable sacrifices for the sake of Russian security, which he clearly puts at the top of his list of priorities, ahead of peace and prosperity, and is probably willing to start a new Cold War if he is not reassured by a new framework and turn to China as its long-term partner, despite Moscow's preference for a partnership with Europe.

About the Author

Ben Aris is the founder and editor-in-chief of business new europe (bne), the leading English-language publication covering business, economics, finance and politics of the 30 countries of the former Soviet Union, Central and South-eastern Europe and Eurasia.

COMMENTARY

“All-in” for Status. Russia's Risky Wargame with (in) Europe

By Maria Raquel Freire (Centre for Social Studies University of Coimbra) and Regina Heller (Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, Hamburg)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000533116

Via Ukraine, Moscow prepares the ground both rhetorically and practically for making clear that Russia has legitimate security interests and that the West has no business being in Russia's neighborhood. Pushing for major power status by threatening war is a risky game.

Russia's Status Problems

The Ukraine conflict has intensified in recent weeks. Europe faces a serious security crisis. Russia ramped up its military forces along Ukraine's border. The West signals rigor, support for Ukraine, and adherence to its principles. At the same time, diplomatic activity is skyrocketing to ease tensions, as fears of war also increase in both Russia and the West. The goal of Russia's massive show of force is no longer only compelling rebellious Ukraine back to the negotiation table. Rather, the purpose is to lend weight to Moscow's demands issued in its proposal to NATO to stop further expanding to the East and to ultimately settle open questions of European security in a way that is acceptable to Russia.

From the Kremlin's perspective, the stakes are high. Russia is in danger of irreversibly losing its status as a regional power and of sinking into irrelevance in

matters of European security. This outlook weighs heavily, increasing the Kremlin's willingness to create facts on the ground. Ukraine is the linchpin, where Russia's status problems come together and, according to Moscow's will, should be resolved. The threat of war seems the best way to achieve these goals.

Identity: Russia as a Major Power

Influence in Ukraine's domestic affairs as well as control over its external policy secures the material foundations of the collective identity, which the Putin regime has promoted over many years and to which it has tied its political fate—i.e., its identity as a major power. Along with the claim of being a nuclear superpower on par with the US, this narrative has a regional dimension, claiming “exclusive” rights in Russia's neighborhood, as well as a European dimension, demanding an equal say in matters of European security. From the Kremlin's position, since the breakup of the Soviet Union and especially in the context of NATO enlargement, the West has ignored its claim of “indivisible” security in Europe. With Ukraine choosing its own path, turning westwards and dismissing Russian hegemony, Russia's status as a regional power is also under threat.