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Where would a new global security architecture leave Ukraine?

Ukraine hopes for a solid outcome from this week's summits between Russia and the West. But it may struggle to find a place in a volatile world order

Last December marked the beginning of a season of intense diplomatic manoeuvring over European security issues. The virtual summit of the US and Russian presidents was largely devoted to the concentration of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine – a scenario which has since not disappeared from the headlines. This week, the West and Russia are holding further international talks on questions of security.

The escalation of an armed conflict remains an unattractive option for Russia: the price is too high and it's highly doubtful whether any gains can be made. But the Kremlin, taking advantage of the increased attention – primarily from the media and from public opinion in the West – has decided to propose and promote its own international security agenda.

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Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, this attempt looks to be well prepared. The West is not ready to aggravate the standoff but instead is willing to engage in dialogue with Moscow. Washington's focus on the Chinese threat is creating a new political landscape for Russia. The stalemate in the resolution of the conflict in Donbass is changing Europe's expectations and hopes. As a result, instead of the diplomatic isolation from seven years ago, there is a willingness to talk to Russia about its concerns – albeit surrounded by numerous 'red lines' from both sides.

What Russia wants – and why

Russia is still talking about the same things: the end of the NATO expansion, the military and political rapprochement between the post-Soviet countries and the West, all of which pose a threat to Russia itself. Moscow proposes that NATO should sign a commitment not to admit any former Soviet states as members and to renounce all military activity on Russian territory, including overflights by heavy bombers and the presence of warships close to Russian territory, as well as a military cooperation on a bilateral level. In return, it proposes something remotely resembling a détente: not to consider each other adversaries and not to deploy short- and medium-range missiles where they can reach each other's territory.

Such a framing seems inappropriate to many, especially after the annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression in Donbass. Talking about the new architecture of international security from the position of a violator of the basic principles of the world order, exerting pressure by the concentration of more than 100,000 troops on the borders with Ukraine – all this does not sound like a trustful dialogue on how to achieve peace and harmony. Many Western politicians are not happy with the formulation of Russia's demands: from their point of view, Moscow should not have a veto over new members joining NATO.

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But from Russia's point of view, NATO in particular, and perhaps the West in general, represent a threat to Russian security. Accordingly, the situation in the post-Soviet space is turning into a zero-sum game: everyone who is with the West is against Russia. In this system, depriving states such as Ukraine or Georgia of their freedom of choice becomes a top priority. Russia wants to make sure – at any price – that they don't become members of NATO or that they receive any other effective security guarantees from Western countries.

This logic is a difficult foundation for building a new security architecture in Europe, because it requires limiting the sovereignty of a number of states. Meanwhile, sovereignty is the key institution of the modern world order.

Explaining the Western perspective

The readiness of the Biden administration to conduct a systematic dialogue with Russia, as shown by both personal and virtual contacts between the presidents of Russia and the United States in 2021, sets a new tone for engagement with Moscow. Russia still needs markets in Europe, access to technology and credit, and, consequently, an easing of sanctions. Moscow hardly wants a new full-fledged arms race. Its cooperation with China remains complex, and its importance is exaggerated.

The signals from the West are quite coordinated and clear. They are mainly about the preservation of the principle of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and preparedness for a dialogue with Russia, but not about the right to veto NATO expansion. The US does not want to discuss a broad European security agenda without its allies at all, focusing instead on bilateral issues, mostly related to strategic stability and cybersecurity. The conditional 'Helsinki 2,' which remains Russia's main geopolitical dream, is unlikely to happen.

Although the Kremlin may expect to shake Western unity and reach some individual agreements with the US, it is unlikely to achieve major concessions. The red lines of negotiation in Washington are pretty tough and do not leave much room for compromise. The Biden administration does need strategic stability talks; it does not need another acute crisis in the Russia-Ukraine conflict; and a further Russia-China alignment is undesirable. But maintaining NATO credibility and freedom of action in Eastern Europe is more important to the United States. And given all the preliminary consultations with allies and the balance of power, Washington's negotiating position looks stronger.

Ukraine's emerging place in a world with new security challenges

For Ukraine, the dialogue between Russia and the United States is undoubtedly extremely important. For the past eight years, Ukraine's entire foreign policy has been built on the assumption that the West will contain and isolate Russia, while helping Ukraine build a more effective and democratic state and fight Russian aggression. It is possible that this assumption was wrong from the beginning: the motives of Western states have always been more complex and varied. However, in terms of Russian policy, their interests and those of Ukraine largely coincided, and this created space for sanctions policy, coordination of positions on Crimea, and intensified military-political cooperation.

If Moscow succeeds in reaching an agreement with Washington, at least in part, this format could be permanently destroyed. US support for Ukraine, rather modest by the standards of modern regional conflicts, may become symbolic altogether; and then Berlin and Paris will be free to pursue their own approaches to interaction with Moscow.

Ukraine, in any case, seems to need to bring its policy towards NATO into line with current realities. Membership in the Alliance has never been a realistic option; by the end of last year even the greatest optimists had become aware of this. If Ukraine remains outside of NATO and the EU, without security guarantees, what will its foreign policy look like? How expensive, and for how long, would Ukrainians be willing to pay to contain Russia, much less act as an outpost for such a policy in the region? It seems that there are no clear answers to these questions and one will have to look for them, in general, regardless of the results of the January talks.

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There will also be consequences for Ukraine's key security problem – the conflict in Donbass. Right now, the settlement process is at a dead end: there is no mutual trust between Moscow and Kyiv , and there is no room for compromise either. Russia maintains the current situation, considering it acceptable. If a broad agreement with Washington fails to be reached, Moscow's goals and tools may be reconsidered. Ukraine may face various challenges: from possible local escalations on the line of contact to Russia's recognition of the ‘DNR/LNR’.

Dialogue between Russia and the United States, Germany and France will continue. The world is changing, and many of the usual problems look different today. The annexation of Crimea was a strong blow to the usual security system for Europeans; but today new challenges are on the agenda. Relaxing confrontation, controlling it, and working together on common problems could be beneficial for all. Therefore, Ukraine needs to think about what its place in this new world will be.



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