

Europe and the United States Play Into Putin's Hands

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Transatlantic disunity and a lack of strategy over how to deal with Russia's ultimatum is placing Europe's security architecture at risk. The West has no choice but to put up a strong united front. When mapping Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions with regard to Europe, there are many dates to consider.

A good starting point may be December 2005, a month after Angela Merkel was sworn in as German chancellor. Her predecessor Gerhard Schröder, a close friend of Putin, who called him an "[impeccable democrat](#)," joined the board of Gazprom's Nord Stream project. Designed to bring gas directly from Russia to Germany, bypassing the transit routes of Ukraine and Poland, the pipeline has become a major [topic of dispute](#) between Europe and the United States as well as among European governments.

The project says something about Germany's enduring adherence to Ostpolitik, a Cold War phenomenon based on the belief that dialogue, détente, and trade would make Europe secure and bring Russia closer to the West.

Nothing came of that during the Schröder or Merkel years. On the contrary, Putin has been on a roll.

He invaded Georgia in 2008, grabbing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The West's response was shamefully weak. It gave Putin the confidence to annex Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and invade eastern Ukraine in 2014. The EU and the United States imposed sanctions—mostly the wrong sort—which Russia shrugged off.

And now, in addition to walking away from [arms control](#) treaties, Putin has upped the stakes by amassing some 100,000 troops on the border with Ukraine, as if poised for another, [bigger invasion](#) of an independent, sovereign country.

Primarily, these actions are about testing the United States, NATO, and Europe. They are about reversing the post-Cold War era by reasserting Russia's pre-1989 military and political influence in Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries in the region. They reflect a dangerous clash of geopolitical and historical realities, which U.S. President Joe Biden's administration must deal with in preparation for the January 10 [meeting](#) between senior U.S. and Russian officials in Geneva.

Putin's tests and threats are contained in two texts issued last month by the Kremlin and meticulously [analyzed](#) by Françoise Thom.

[One text](#), which amounts to an ultimatum, is titled the “Treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees.” The [second](#) is an “Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and the member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.” Moscow’s stated goal is to obtain legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO, without delay.

Both documents set out to intimidate and ban NATO from further expansion eastward, including to Ukraine and Georgia. This is despite promises by NATO leaders at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest that both countries could one day join the alliance.

Read Article 4 of the so-called [treaty](#) on security guarantees. “The United States of America shall undertake to prevent further eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and deny accession to the Alliance to the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” What pre-1989 language.

Then there’s Article 7 of the so-called [agreement](#) on security measures. It states that members of NATO “shall not conduct any military activities on the territory of Ukraine as well as of the other States in the Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia.”

What has Russia been doing in these countries over the past several years? And now in [Kazakhstan](#), where President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [asked](#) for Russian military assistance to quell protests sparked by rising energy prices.

The reaction by the Europeans and the United States to these texts was one of confusion that played into Putin’s hands. The Kremlin requested talks with the United States, now scheduled for January 10. This follows video calls between Biden and Putin in [December](#). Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have only disdain for the EU, so when the bloc’s foreign policy chief Josep Borell insisted the EU be involved in the talks, they refused. Biden didn’t insist. This was a tactical mistake by Washington—and Berlin. Both should have pushed for a united Western front. That would have strengthened the West, especially since the Baltic States, Poland, and other EU countries in the region, such as Finland and Sweden, understand Russia.

In contrast, the “old” big EU member states fail to fully appreciate the history of their Central European counterparts, their [perceptions of Russia](#), and their security concerns. These failings are strategic and patronizing mistakes that further weaken European unity. The Kremlin, for its part, much prefers dealing bilaterally with France and Germany, as it has done for decades. The Élysée and the Chancellery are now using diplomacy to diffuse the tensions and will no doubt reassure the Kremlin about their opposition to further NATO enlargement.

Unfortunately, it doesn't matter that the German foreign ministry is led by Annalena Baerbock, a Green politician who has not shied away from criticizing Russia's awful human rights record and the recent [closure](#) of Memorial. The Russia dossier will remain in the Chancellery under Olaf Scholz who, along with his foreign policy advisor, believe in dialogue with Moscow. The same goes for France and Italy.

As the Russia-U.S. meeting approaches, the transatlantic alliance is at its weakest. It has broken its own red lines, shying away from imposing sanctions on companies involved in Nord Stream 2, going back on its commitment to Ukraine and Georgia, and doing nothing after Alexei Navalny was sent to prison on his return to Russia a year ago.

The United States, the EU, and NATO now say that if Russia invades Ukraine there will be a price to pay. Russia has already invaded Ukraine. And they say that Russia has no veto over which countries can join NATO, which is patently untrue.

Unless Biden and EU leaders understand how Russia is dictating the future of the transatlantic relationship, European security will be seriously undermined and Eastern Europe will pay a high price.

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