

NATO ALLIANCE SHOWING SIGNS OF FRAYING; U.S.-UK LEAD ON RUSSIA QUESTIONED BY EUROPEAN PARTNERS

Posted on January 27, 2022



Over the past couple of days, a deluge of events, press releases, and commentary touching on the Russia-NATO issue has buried news desks. It proved,

however, highly revealing of the alliance's internal cracks.

Category: [NEWS](#)

Tags: [Antony Blinken](#), [Emmanuel Macron](#), [Germany](#), [Josep Borrell](#), [Kay-Achim Schoenbach](#), [NATO](#), [Russia](#), [Sergey Lavrov](#), [Ukraine](#), [United States](#)

Over the past couple of days, a deluge of events, press releases, and commentary touching on the Russia-NATO issue has buried news desks everywhere. It proved, however, highly revealing of the alliance's internal cracks.

The kick-off was a disquieting [Sunday statement](#) by the U.S. State Department. On the heels of a [fruitless meeting](#) between the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, it warned of the "continued threat of Russian military action," and went so far as not only to discourage any travel to Ukraine but to order diplomats' family members to leave the country. While it still allowed U.S. diplomats to leave voluntarily, the decision [prompted](#) its close NATO ally, the UK, to withdraw staff and dependents from its own Ukraine embassy one day later.

Their NATO allies within the EU, who have [most to lose](#) in case of either war with—or [sanctions](#) being placed on—Russia, [did not follow suit](#). At a meeting on Monday of EU foreign ministers, with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in attendance via videolink, top European diplomat Josep Borrell said that "we are not going to do the same thing because we don't know any specific reasons." His justification was that there was no need to "dramatize" as long as negotiations were still going on. Russia has remained firm in denying having any intention for a Ukraine invasion. The EU's foreign ministers however did decide to double their assistance to an [economically crippled](#) Ukraine, with a [€1.2 billion package](#).

Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Defense has put around [8,500 American troops on](#)

heightened alert. Should Russia invade, these would be deployed to the region, but not Ukraine itself. NATO ships and fighter jets have also been dispatched. Yet not by powers one would expect, such as Germany, France or Italy, but by much smaller ones such as Denmark.

<https://twitter.com/ianbremmer/status/1484672941988143107>

While circumstances differ, the situation is reminiscent of the 2003 decision to invade Iraq. The mission, largely led by the U.S. and UK, didn't enjoy wide support among NATO members. While it was tacitly approved (or suffered to happen), it meant some countries did not provide material and personnel. The same could be occurring now. Another striking parallel is the role of British intelligence. In a Saturday statement, the UK foreign office claimed to have intel that the Russian government is planning to "install a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv as it considers whether to invade and occupy Ukraine." It divulged no hard proof of this, however. It's this same reliance on supposed "intel" that served as a pretext for the invasion of Iraq, which was suspected of possessing weapons of mass destruction (WMD's). After Saddam Hussein's Iraq fell, it became clear that British intelligence had failed to paint an accurate picture. The country had largely abandoned its WMD programmes after being hit by NATO air strikes in 1998. In this light, the rhetoric coming out of London and Washington might well be a ploy to convince European allies into towing their line. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has responded by accusing Washington of fuelling tensions, and acting alongside NATO to drive the crisis, without regard for its own build-up of troops near the Ukrainian border.

There is more that points to a shaking up of the European security architecture. In a recent speech by French President Emmanuel Macron, meant to outline his ambitions for the six-month French presidency of the European Union, he advocated a "new security order" facilitated by NATO. It is safe to assume that Macron's burning desire for a "true European Army," wherein security provided by the U.S. becomes obsolete, has never dimmed.

The case of Europe's largest economy, Germany, is also well-known. Partly because of its

heavy reliance on cheap Russian gas through Nord Stream 2, it has taken on a [proactive role](#) in securing its energy needs. A renewed focus on establishing stable trade relations with Moscow, while expressing a *pro forma* commitment to allies who feel threatened by Russia at the same time, seems to define its current foreign policy.

That balancing act can be illustrated by two recent examples. Only a few days ago, Germany [blocked fellow NATO member Estonia](#) from supplying weapons of German origin to Ukraine. Germany has made it a point to refuse the provisioning of arms to bolster Ukraine's defenses, be it directly or indirectly. It is safe to assume it hereby seeks to protect its trade interests with Russia. Around the same time, controversy stoked by [recent comments](#) made by German Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schoenbach persuaded him to step down this Saturday.

Speaking during a think-tank discussion in India the day before, Schoenbach had said "what he [Putin] really wants is respect," and that "giving someone respect is low cost, even no cost... It is easy to give him the respect he really demands—and probably also deserves." Schoenbach went on to call Russia an old and important country, and that "the Crimea peninsula [Which Russia annexed in 2014, following a coup in Kyiv] is gone, it will never come back, this is a fact." Germany's defense ministry did not take these remarks lightly, and said they did not reflect Germany's position in either content or wording.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wQLkNE6XF8>

Such divisions are not limited to Western-European NATO members. In Eastern Europe, [frank comments made](#) by the Croatian president—and supreme commander of its army—Zoran Milanović, have stoked controversy. On Tuesday he said that Ukraine does not belong in NATO, and that in no way would Croatia get involved or send its soldiers there in case of escalation. He went on to say that the EU had triggered a coup in the country in 2014, which ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. The ongoing crisis he attributed to the U.S., adding that "matters of international security reflect inconsistencies and dangerous behavior" by its administration, influenced by "hawks in the Democrat and Republican party." He concluded by saying that "all that is taking place in

the antechamber of Russia,” and that “one must reach a deal that will take account of the security interests of Russia.” He also criticized Prime Minister Andrej Plenković’s handling of Ukraine. The prime minister responded on public television by saying he did not hear all of it but that he first thought a Russian military officer was speaking.

Meanwhile, in Paris a [meeting](#) took place on Wednesday, January 26th between political advisers from Russia, Ukraine, France, and [Germany](#). The group held “[Normandy format](#)” talks on ending the separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine. While no major breakthroughs were made after the 8 hour-long talks, a French official [said](#) that they were a “good signal” from Russia and a “step toward defusing broader tensions.” Major differences however still remain, with further talks planned in Berlin in two weeks.

Before the meetings, Serhiy Harmash, a Ukrainian journalist appointed by the Ukrainian government to represent the occupied Donetsk region, said not much will be resolved there. He believes the Normandy format itself to be generally beneficial to Russia. During an interview with [Dom TV](#), he said that “nothing revolutionary will happen ... I expect no significant actions and decisions to be taken at tomorrow's meeting. I think it will be more diplomatic on Russia’s part, especially since Russia has already gained the withdrawal of the bill, which has been repeatedly criticized by Putin personally,” he explained.

The bill he refers to is a bill on “[transition period](#)” policy, the withdrawal of which by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine just ahead of the meeting Harmash called a “strange coincidence.” Among other things, the document proposes to consolidate at the legislative level the definition of Russia as an aggressor and occupying state. Eastern Ukraine has been embroiled in conflict between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists since 2014. The two main cities there, Donetsk and Luhansk, are self-proclaimed republics in its Donbass region.

Such talks do not directly address Russia’s broader concern over [NATO expansion](#), however. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [said](#) on Tuesday that “Moscow’s further position will be determined” after it receives a written response from the U.S. “Let us first get the answer. It will be analyzed and then the position will be formulated based on the

framework guidelines from the head of state," he concluded.

On Wednesday, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow provided such a written response. In it, the U.S. repeated its commitment to upholding NATO's "open-door" policy while offering a "principled and pragmatic evaluation" of the Kremlin's concerns, [Secretary of State Antony Blinken said](#). "Putting things in writing is ... a good way to make sure we're as precise as possible, and the Russians understand our positions, our ideas, as clearly as possible. Right now, the document is with them and the ball is in their court," he added. On Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Peskov [responded to the document](#), saying that the U.S. and NATO didn't seem to have taken Russia's concerns on security guarantees into account when drawing up their responses, nor having demonstrated any willingness to do so. He also responded to previous comments made by POTUS Joe Biden, who said on Tuesday he would consider imposing sanctions on Putin personally if he invades Ukraine. Calling such a move "politically destructive," Peskov added that Russia's top leaders were legally barred from holding assets, property and bank accounts abroad. The spokesman had previously said that imposing sanctions on Putin would amount to a severing of diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, Russia staged new military drills on land and on the Black Sea on Wednesday and moved paratroopers and fighter jets to close ally Belarus, in preparation for "joint exercises" next month. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba [has acknowledged](#) that Russia is massing troops near Ukraine's border. He however does not believe it has immediate plans to invade. He said Ukraine is preparing itself for all scenarios, but that Russia's main strategy now was to destabilize Ukraine, mainly through hybrid warfare tactics such as cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns. "We understand that a military operation is something they keep in the pocket, it's not something they put ahead of other options," he said.